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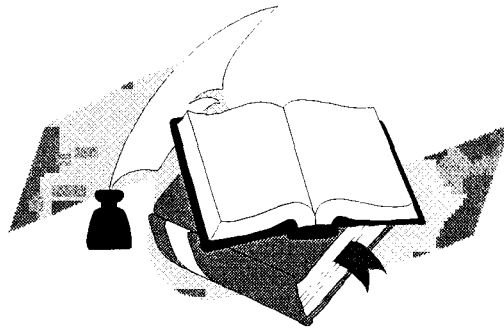
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**REVERSED PERSPECTIVES:**  
**A Re-examination of the Later Novels of**  
**William Wilkie Collins**



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April 2000

## Reversed Perspectives:

### A Re-examination of the Later Novels of William Wilkie Collins

Although a considerable amount of research has been done on Collins's sensation fiction, very little critical attention has been paid to his later novels. Of those critics who have chosen to consider his post-1870 fiction, the majority have dismissed it as so inferior to his early works as to be best passed over as quickly as possible. Some feel that, without Dickens to guide his pen, Collins was incapable of writing anything worth reading; others suspect that the influence of Charles Reade was as detrimental to Collins's talent as Dickens's had been beneficial; yet more decided that laudanum had fogged both his mind and his literary imagination. The purpose of this thesis is to refute these claims, and to establish that Collins's later works remain of great interest from both a literary and a social point of view.

The thesis is divided into seven sections—an Apology, an Introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion.

The Apology sets out to examine the modern hostility towards the novels written in the last two decades of his life, and to show how this frequently varies from contemporary opinion. As I do not ascribe to the theory that Collins's novels reveal a steady decline over the years, I have chosen not to adopt a chronological examination of his works, but rather a thematic one, which illustrates the consistency of his philosophy.

The Introduction attempts to show that the difference between what is popularly called Collins's 'sensation' fiction and his 'thesis' novels is not so hard and fast as has often been maintained. It also introduces the ideas which will be developed throughout the thesis, namely that, by the sublation of many of the binary oppositions we have come to connect with Victorian literature—masculine/feminine, good/evil, hero/villain—Collins's works provide a reversed perspective on his society.

Chapter 1, 'Good Girls', considers *Heart and Science* (1883), *The Two Destinies* (1876), and *Man and Wife* (1870). The second half of the nineteenth century was, for women, a time of upheaval; the Angel in the House had been superseded by her more dynamic and independent sister, whose inadequacy as a role-model was a frequent theme in much of the literature of the time. Whilst society was attempting to maintain the status quo by demanding that men be men and women subservient, these three novels stand out as defying—or, at least, ridiculing—convention on almost all gender-related levels.

Chapter 2, 'Fallen Women', concentrates upon *The Evil Genius* (1886), *The New Magdalen* (1873), and *The Fallen Leaves* (1879). Collins was not the only author to deal with the subject of women who transgressed the moral code, but he was one of the few who had the courage to stand by his fallen women until the end. Rather than sentencing them to a penitential death, he allows them, reformed and unsullied by their previous degradation, to marry and reclaim their place in society. Moreover, he also shows that it is frequently those representatives of respectable society whose actions and attitudes are much more at fault than those of the women they choose to censure.

Chapter 3, 'Wicked Creatures', is a long chapter which analyses *'I Say No'* (1884), *Blind Love* (1890), *The Legacy of Cain* (1888), and *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880). Collins's deep-seated belief in the duality of human nature, which has already been suggested in the previous chapters, is here more fully explored. Just as his 'heroines' have been seen to defy their conventional roles, rising gracefully above the tribulations of pregnancy, prostitution, and persecution, so too do his villainesses flout the rules by which such wicked creatures should more properly be governed. His household devils are no more wholly demonic than his domestic angels are wholly sublime.

Chapter 4, 'Other Men', discusses *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), *The Black Robe* (1881), and *The Law and The Lady* (1875). Not only were women expected by contemporary society to comply with an ideal, but men also found themselves being exhorted to conform to an active and dominant masculine archetype. The novels examined in this chapter shows the consequences of the failure to live up to these frequently impossible standards. Rather than adhere to the binary oppositions of selfless/selfish, wise/foolish, strong/weak, Collins presents his reader with composite figures who are, perhaps, truer to human nature than literature usually allows.

The Conclusion draws together the threads of the previous chapters. It also looks at Collins as a nineteenth-century writer with surprisingly modern ideas, and examines Collins's literary legacy, which is more usually to be found in the field of popular fiction.

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To T. J. W.,

with gratitude and affection.



## A NOTE ON THE TEXTS USED AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



When I began my research into Collins's later novels, I found, to my horror, that the majority of them—*The Law and the Lady* being a notable exception—were not readily available in any kind of affordable edition, and I found that I had to invest in first and second editions of some of the books, just to have my own copies. *The Evil Genius* was bought in Canada. After a while, however, the British publishing house Alan Sutton brought out the later novels in paperback, and I found myself in the curious situation of working, in some cases, from original nineteenth-century editions, and , in others, from their twentieth-century counterparts. Because of this, I began giving references to Collins's works by chapter number—in the form, for example, *BL* (for *Blind Love*), Ch. IV—rather than by page number, as is more usual. It was, originally, my intention to adjust these references to the pagination of the first editions. However, upon reflection, I decided against such a course of action for the following reasons: firstly, I thought it improbable that any prospective reader would have a complete set of the first edition of the later novels on his or her bookshelves; and secondly, I could not decide whether he or she would be more likely to consult the first editions which may or may not be contained within his or her University library, or the paperback editions which would probably be found on the shelves of the nearest Waterstones. Wanting to cover either eventuality, I left the references which follow quotations in the text, by chapter, preceded by the initials of the book in question.

In the case of reviews, I have drawn heavily on Norman Page's *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974). I have not mentioned individual

reviews in my Bibliography unless they are of particular significance or do not appear in full, or at all, in Page.

I should like to thank the following people for the assistance they gave me in the writing of this thesis: most of all, my first supervisor, Tom Winnifrith, without whose guidance and support I should soon have floundered; John Rignall, who stepped into the breach during the final stages; my husband, Steve, who has had to put up, when my research has not been going as well as it might, with my bad moods for the last five years; Jenny Taylor, who suggested this area of study; Lillian Nayder, for her interest and faith in my work; Paul Cameron for giving up his time to act as proof-reader; and Caroline Robson and Deborah McVea, for providing me with motivation, and, at times much-needed, reassurance.

Thanks are also due to John Hamm, who gave me a copy of *'I Say No'* via the Internet at the time when affordable editions of Collins's later works were unavailable, and even specialist bookshops were unable to obtain a first edition of the text for me; to Simon Cooke, for lending me *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital*, which I forgot to return; to Wendy Tweeddale MRCVS for her comments on the behaviour of animals; to Peter Larkin in particular, and to the rest of the staff of Warwick University Library in general, for their patience and assistance; and to Tom French, of the British Library, for his help in locating the MS of *The Red Vial*.

I should also like to express my gratitude to my parents, George and Mabyn Pye, who unfortunately died before this thesis was completed, for their love and encouragement throughout the first thirty-three years of my life.



## AN APOLOGY



The position of Mr. Wilkie Collins in literature was a very unusual one. He was an extremely popular writer—deservedly popular, as we think—who was not very highly esteemed.<sup>1</sup>

This view, put forward by M. W. Townsend in his obituary of Wilkie Collins in 1889, has remained curiously accurate for over a hundred years. Despite the immense popularity of his fiction during his lifetime, and indeed for some time afterwards, Collins has never been regarded as an author of any great literary standing. For many years, in fact, he has been seen simply as an obscure minor figure, his only claims to fame being his relationship with Dickens, whose influence some critics have identified in the younger man's novelistic style, and an ability to construct complicated, sensational plots, in the manner of Mary Elizabeth Braddon. This tendency towards comparison is, of course, destructive. Critics who admire Dickens or Braddon will inevitably be disappointed if they expect to find the achievement of those novelists reproduced in Collins's fiction.<sup>2</sup> Collins is not—and never tried to be—anyone other than himself; and his novels, judged according to their own merits, and not according to those of his peers', are worthy of much greater recognition than has usually been allowed. Indeed, this inclination always to

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<sup>1</sup> From M. W. Townsend, "Cleverness Rather Than Genius": The Excellence and Limitations of Wilkie Collins', *Spectator*, 63 (1889), 395-96; quoted in Norman Page, *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 249.

<sup>2</sup> Although Braddon herself was happy to concede that Collins's novels were superior to her own, her admirers are less accommodating.

compare Collins with other writers, rather than to accept him as an author in his own right, has been one of the reasons Collins's works have not been granted the status they deserve. Although some critical attention has, grudgingly in many cases, been paid to the novels of the 1860s<sup>3</sup>—*The Woman in White* (1860), *No Name* (1862), *Armada* (1866), and *The Moonstone* (1868)—‘the rest are forgotten by all except the most dedicated specialists.’<sup>4</sup> An erroneous theory exists that Collins died in relative obscurity, and was almost wholly neglected until T. S. Eliot kindly resurrected him, in 1927, in an essay in the *Times Literary Supplement*; but this is not the case.<sup>5</sup> As Ashley shows, from the time of their publication in the nineteenth century and certainly for the first decade at least of the twentieth, almost all the novels were readily available, and it would seem that the whole of Collins's fiction was more widely read before Eliot's essay than after it. From this time interest appears to have revolved around *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is the view which has predominated, having been propagated by modern authorities such as Tamar Heller who, in *Dead Secrets*, assures her readers that ‘if Collins' literary reputation was particularly low during the first half of the twentieth century, it had already begun to decline during his career, which spanned forty years, from 1848 until his death in 1889,’ a turn of events which she ascribes both to the ‘critical devaluation of his work,’ and to the ‘low quality of the fiction.’<sup>7</sup>

Whilst the novels of the 1850s have been dismissed as the understandably feeble attempts of a novice to perform great and worthy tasks, and the novels of the 1860s eulogized, by some, as the masterpieces they undeniably are, or condemned, by others, as scandalous and unsuitable reading matter for the genteel young ladies into whose

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3 Philip O'Neill, in *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property, and Propriety* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1988), notes that ‘even this appropriation is not given the academy's full seal of approval’ (p. 1).

4 Page, Introduction, p. xiii.

5 T. S. Eliot, ‘Wilkie Collins and Dickens’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 331 (1927), 525-26; reprinted in *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), pp. 422-32.

6 Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London: Arthur Barker, 1952), pp. 130-31.

7 Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 5, 164-65.

hands they might fall, the novels of the 1870s and 1880s are those which have suffered from the most unfair and inconsistent treatment. It is upon these novels written in the last two decades of Collins's life—some thirteen in total—that I focus my study.<sup>8</sup> Robert Ashley has remarked that 'perhaps no other English novelist of comparable stature has been the victim of such misrepresentation and slipshod scholarship as Wilkie Collins.'<sup>9</sup> The aim of this Apology is to examine some of the myths which surround Collins's later works. I shall go on, in the course of this study, to illustrate the extent to which critical misunderstanding has led to Collins's minor literary status, and establish that his later novels, and not just those of the 1860s, have both period and perennial interest.

Although much research has been done on Collins's sensation fiction (much, that is, of the total scholarship on Collins, which is by no means extensive), hardly any attention has been paid to his later novels. What little critical opinion does exist, although divided on many points, seems to concur that, after 1870, Collins's fiction betrays all too visible signs of severe deterioration. Moreover, of those critics who do choose to consider Collins's post-1870 fiction, the majority dismiss it as so inferior to his earlier works as to be best passed over as quickly as possible. Even those who have written monographs on Collins alone frequently run out of steam, pages, or inspiration, once they have discussed the novels of the 1860s. Tamar Heller waits until the 'Epilogue' of *Dead Secrets* before broaching the subject of the later novels; Robert Ashley devotes to them a mere twelve pages, and William Marshall is generous enough to allow each one a whole page or two to itself.<sup>10</sup> Sue Lonoff mentions them, with disapproval throughout, and there can be no doubt in the reader's mind that she is never happier than when discussing her favourite

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8 I concentrate only upon Collins's full-length novels, beginning, chronologically, with *Man and Wife* (1870). Collins's many short stories, and his four novellas, *The Frozen Deep* (1874), *A Rogue's Life* (1879), *The Haunted Hotel* (1879), *My Lady's Money* (1879), and *The Guilty River* (1886) are excluded, in all cases, on the grounds of length, and, in the case of the first two, because their publication in book form post-dates their creation by approximately twenty years.

9 Robert P. Ashley, Jr., 'Wilkie Collins Reconsidered', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 4 (1950), p. 265.

10 William H. Marshall, *Wilkie Collins*, Twayne's English Authors Series (New York: Twayne, 1970).

*Moonstone*.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the majority of the articles in Lyn Pykett's Macmillan Casebook on Wilkie Collins is also devoted to *The Moonstone*.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, Norman Page, who complains in his Introduction to *The Critical Heritage* that Collins and his works have been overlooked, then follows the example of those he censures in relation to the later novels: 'the ten novels from *The Law and the Lady*,' he tells us, 'are here dealt with much more summarily.'<sup>13</sup> Of course, each author has his reasons for this dismissive treatment of these novels: Ashley suggests—paradoxically—that they are better discussed collectively because,

[...] during these years [1870s and 1880s] Collins seems to have been unable to make up his mind just what kind of novelist he wanted to be, sensationalist or social critic, romanticist or realist, with the result that his fiction follows no consistent line of development.<sup>14</sup>

Jenny Taylor recognizes that,

[...] to treat a selection of his novels written during the 1870s and 1880s in a single chapter and inevitably schematically, tracing developments between novels rather than exploring the complexity of individual narratives, seems to make assumptions about the second half of his career that concurs with the overwhelming consensus on his later work that it represents a process of steady and irreversible decline,<sup>15</sup>

—but she does so all the same. Lillian Nayder provides her readers with a much more balanced treatment of all of Collins's works, but the constraints of the Twayne's English Author Series prevent a thorough examination of Collins's post-1870 fiction.<sup>16</sup> George

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11 Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers: A Study in the Rhetoric of Authorship* (New York: AMS Press, 1982).

12 *Wilkie Collins*, New Casebook Series, ed. by Lyn Pykett (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998).

13 Page, p. 201. The distinction Page makes between the earlier and later novels is, however, restricted to the amount of space he dedicates to each book. His overall treatment of Collins's works is unbiased, and his book provides any student of Collins's writing with an invaluable source of both positive and negative contemporary references.

14 Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 113.

15 Jenny Bourne Taylor, 'Wilkie Collins and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Cultural Significance and Fictional Form' (unpublished doctoral thesis: University of Warwick, 1987), pp. 241-42.

16 Lillian Nayder, *Wilkie Collins*, Twayne's English Author Series (New York: Twayne, 1998).

Watt, in his book *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*, is one of the few to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in treating the later novels collectively, and to observe that 'it is time the minor works were treated as the subject of a major study, both their merits and their flaws being discussed at some length.'<sup>17</sup> This, then, is my intention.

Having agreed that Collins's later fiction—his so-called 'thesis' novels—cannot compare with his earlier works, his so-called 'sensation' novels, the critics cease to agree. Some feel that without Dickens to guide his pen, Collins was incapable of writing anything worth reading; others suspect that Charles Reade's influence was as detrimental to Collins's talent as Dickens's had been beneficial; yet more are persuaded that laudanum was fogging both his mind and his literary imagination; a few consider that his quest for social reform had become so overwhelming that he cared little for his art; and a couple even suggest that he was suffering from premature senility, or used ghost writers to ease his terrific work load.<sup>18</sup> George Sargent, unable to make his mind up so precisely, blames a combination of over-production, ill health, failing eyesight, and crusading zeal for the fact that the later novels 'set no rivers on fire, even in that time when rivers had an oleaginous surface.'<sup>19</sup> The theories may vary, but the consensus remains the same: from 1870 Collins's fiction severely declined in quality. But did it? Certainly some aspects of Collins's novels changed: his stories became less complex, but critics had previously attacked him for being too intricate and labyrinthine in his plots; he spent more time examining and justifying the deeds and motivations of his characters, but, again, he had

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17 George Watt, *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 99.

18 The first four of these theories are referred to by most of Collins's critics and biographers; the last two are mentioned by Sue Lonoff, p. 169, and by Bradford A. Booth, 'Wilkie Collins and the Art of Fiction', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 6 (1951), 131-43, respectively.

19 George H. Sargent, 'The Centenary of a Nearly-Forgotten Victorian Author', *Antiques* (1924), 67.



been criticized for a lack of character delineation in his earlier novels; he developed a social conscience, but how many novelists of the late nineteenth century did not?<sup>20</sup>

One of the most unjust criticisms of Collins's work is that he was almost completely dependent, firstly, on Charles Dickens, whom Eliza Lynn Linton likened to 'a literary Mentor to [Collins's] younger Telemachus,' and subsequently, on Charles Reade.<sup>21</sup> Although giving but scant evidence to support her claim, Lonoff asserts that 'the quality of Collins's fiction did not taper off gradually after Dickens's death: rather there was a marked and immediate drop,' a situation she attributes to Collins's lack of self-assurance: 'he was willing to take advice from Reade, but Reade was a follower who praised his weaknesses and probably fostered their development.'<sup>22</sup> Whilst it is certainly true that in the earliest stages of the authors' friendship, Collins was both flattered and impressed by Dickens's interest in his fiction, the relationship was by no means so one-sided as Lonoff chooses to imply. It could also be argued that Dickens, the self-styled 'Inimitable', learned as much from Collins as Collins did from him. Certainly, the unfinished *Edwin Drood* shows many Collinsian elements, and T. S. Eliot maintains that:

It is perfectly reasonable to believe that the relationships of the two men [...] affected profoundly the later work of each. We seem to find traces of it in *Little Dorrit* and *The Tale of Two Cities* [sic.]. Collins could never have invented Durdles and Deputy; but Durdles and Deputy were obviously to play their part in a whole, *bien charpenté* as Collins's work is, and as the work of Dickens prior to *Bleak House* is not.<sup>23</sup>

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20 Even Dickens has, in the latter half of this century, become a victim of similar prejudice: as Roger Fowler observes, 'when Dickens's anniversary was mentioned in a T.V. spot on 7 February 1983, the novelist was identified through a list of his works which totally excluded the later "social" novels' ('Polyphony and Problematic in *Hard Times*', in *The Changing World of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Robert Giddings (London: Vision, 1983), pp. 91-108 (p. 91)).

21 Eliza Lynn Linton, *My Literary Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), p. 71. Interestingly, Collins entitles Chapter XXVII of '*I Say No*' 'Mentor and Telemachus', and subsequently comments on the longwindedness of the former.

22 Lonoff, p. 53.

23 Eliot, *Essays*, p. 428. Some five pages earlier, Eliot has described *Bleak House* as Dickens's 'best novel'.

J. W. T. Ley, however, identifies Collins's influence in all of Dickens's works published after *The Lazy Tour*, and blames the younger man for the older's subsequent lack of 'sparkle' and spontaneity.<sup>24</sup> By the same token, although Collins sought Reade's opinion of his later work, it would be simplistic in the extreme to assume that a novelist as talented and experienced as Collins would allow his fiction to be impaired by another man's poor judgment. The arrogance and determination shown in many of his Prefaces should surely be indication enough that Collins would defend his position regardless of the form in which opposition might manifest itself. Indeed, it would appear that Reade, who submitted his manuscripts to Collins for assessment and criticism, was much more the influenced than the influencer. Collinsian elements have been noted, not only in the works of Reade, but also in the those of many other 'great' novelists. Martin Seymour-Smith remarks that Thomas Hardy looked to Collins for inspiration (Reade was 'too crude') when venturing into more sensational fiction: *Desperate Remedies* is modelled partly on *The Woman in White* and *Basil*, and elements of Miserrimus Dexter can be detected in Stephen Dale in *A Laodicean*. Seymour-Smith also discerns Collins's influence in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, whilst Rosemary Ashton likens certain aspects of *Felix Holt* to his early works, and Catherine Peters hears echoes of *No Name*, a novel which George Eliot and G. H. Lewes found 'rather dreary,' in *Daniel Deronda*.<sup>25</sup>

Another popular, and arguably contradictory, theory is that the once great novelist, was ultimately reduced almost to the point of ridicule, as he pathetically attempted, in his last, laudanum-fogged years, to grind out shoddy novels which would be ignored by public and press alike. Lewis Melville refers to Collins as 'a man old before his time, with

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24 J. W. T. Ley, 'Wilkie Collins's Influence on Dickens', *The Dickensian*, 20 (1924), 65-69.

25 Martin Seymour-Smith, *Hardy* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), pp. 122, 273; Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), p. 286; Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 249. These are but a few examples, the purpose of which is to show that rather than taking others as his example, Collins has provided the pattern for many of his contemporaries.

his health wasted and his powers of creation dimmed,'<sup>26</sup> and Ashley quotes equally graphic and pitying remarks made by Walpole, de la Mare, Fitzgerald, and Haycraft:

By 1870, says Hugh Walpole, he was 'almost deserted and forgotten.' There was 'no question ... of the decline in his literary reputation,' writes Walter de la Mare. Percy Fitzgerald, with unconcealed satisfaction, remarks, 'Later it was sad to see how Collins's popularity fell off. His own special style ... was quite exhausted, and he was issuing feeble replicas which brought him, I suspect, but little.' Finally, Howard Haycraft writes, '... he fell into obscurity in his last years and died ungratefully forgotten in his own lifetime.'<sup>27</sup>

Marshall, too, describes him as 'ravaged by pain and ill-health and progressively addicted to the alleviating laudanum, [sinking] into torpid composition.'<sup>28</sup> Whatever Collins's physical state may have been, his novels still maintained a high level of creativity, for which 'torpid' is not the most appropriate of adjectives. That he was addicted to laudanum is not in doubt (he frequently and openly consumed quantities of the drug which would normally have proved fatal);<sup>29</sup> that his addiction seriously impaired the quality of his work is, however, open to question: both Catherine Peters and William Clarke identify the commencement of Collins's drug dependency as occurring some time before he wrote *The Moonstone* (1868), a novel generally regarded as one of his best works, and certainly one innocent of all torpidity.

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26 Lewis Melville, *Victorian Novelists* (London: Archibald, Constable, 1906, repr. Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Press, 1970), p. 136.

27 Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, pp. 127-28. Although Ashley does not tell us the sources of these quotations, they are: Hugh Walpole, 'Novelists of the Seventies', *The Eighteen-Seventies: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature*, ed. by Harley Granville-Barker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929); Walter de la Mare, 'The Early Novels of Wilkie Collins', *The Eighteen-Sixties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature*, ed. by John Drinkwater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932); Percy Fitzgerald, *Memoirs of Charles Dickens: With an Account of 'Household Words' and 'All the Year Round' and of the Contributors Thereto* (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1913); Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York and London: Appleton-Century, 1941).

28 Marshall, p. 20. Marshall also chooses to interpret, somewhat freely, I would argue, Walter Besant's Preface to *Blind Love* as proof of Collins's sad end. This Preface, he tells us, 'would seem to reveal that, when unafflicted by pain and drugs, Wilkie Collins could bring to his work firm touches of what he once possessed; but he could no longer sustain this level of invention' (pp. 20-21).

29 See Peters, pp. 336-37, and William M. Clarke, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* (London: W. H. Allen, 1988), pp. 163-65.

The view that Collins's fiction declined because, during the latter part of his career, he suddenly, and without warning, gave up being a sensation novelist, and became a social critic instead, is one which is quite widely held. It is not, however, one which is based on fact (although it may have some foundation in Swinburne's often-quoted couplet, 'What brought good Wilkie's genius nigh perdition?/Some demon whispered—"Wilkie! have a mission"').<sup>30</sup> As early as *Antonina* (1850), Collins's preoccupation with social ills is apparent when he makes Numerian illustrate the evils of religious fanaticism; in *Basil* (1852) he exposes the boorishness of the middle-classes in an industrial environment; *Hide and Seek* (1854) attacks the Victorian bourgeoisie for their indifferent treatment of those who find themselves on the margin of society; *The Dead Secret* (1857) is dominated by the absurdity of moral distinctions based upon wealth; *The Woman in White* (1860) and *No Name* (1862) have as a principal theme the injustice of the laws concerning inheritance and marriage; and, whilst *Armada* (1866) reveals a much vaguer preoccupation with social disorder, Collins cannot resist occasional comments upon the inconsistencies of the law, and upon the danger implicit in the private control of sanatoria. Collins, then, always had social protest in mind: he simply allowed it, in his later novels, to assume a more prominent position within the narrative.

My contention, then, is that Collins's later works, whilst revealing a change in emphasis and structure, did not decline in the way so many critics would like us to believe. Whilst not all of the later novels were of a uniform standard, any more than were the earlier ones, there is no evidence of the sudden plunge into mediocrity described by Lonoff, nor of the slow but inexorable descent favoured by de la Mare, Marshall, *et al.* Because of this, this study is not restricted to a chronological examination of the novels. Instead, the most appropriate treatment of these later works is a thematic one, which provides a more comprehensive picture of Collins's unconventional attitudes towards the society in which he lived.

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30 Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Wilkie Collins', *Fortnightly Review*, n. s. 46 (1889), 589-99 (p. 594).

Another myth which has developed with time is that Collins's relationship with the press was, at best, uneasy, and, more frequently, downright antagonistic. In fact, Collins's early works, with the possible exception of *Basil*, were reviewed fairly, as were his middle-period novels, although several critics took exception to the tone of the Preface to *Armada*. This was not a unique event; Collins's Prefaces, rather than his novels themselves, were often the cause of press hostility, and, occasionally, had a prejudicial effect on their successors.<sup>31</sup> The novels of the 1870s and 1880s, however, are those upon which the critics had the most difficulty in reaching any sort of persuasive consensus, with very different opinions being held on the same work. Nevertheless, as Robert Ashley rather sweepingly points out, 'except when he wrote "daring" novels and aggressive prefaces, Collins could [in the 1870s and 1880s] usually count on a sympathetic, if not enthusiastic, reception.'<sup>32</sup>

*Man and Wife* (1870), for example, a novel no more 'daring' than any of Collins's others, and with no outrageously inflammatory preface, received mixed praise from its reviewers: *Putnam's Magazine* condemned Collins for his use of 'social abuses' as a theme, insisting that 'what we want is not reformers, but novelists.' Mrs Oliphant, writing in *Blackwood's Magazine*, likewise criticized Collins's choice of theme, because she felt 'his strength, which lies in plot and complication of incident, does not lend itself successfully to polemics.' The *Saturday Review*, however, was less adamant in its criticism. Although disapproving of the novel's moral tone—'If one moral is generally too much, two morals are surely unjustifiable,'—its reviewer concluded that, in spite of its flaws, '*Man and Wife* is an exciting and spirited story, and though it is hardly the kind which will bear two readings, nobody is likely to repent of one.' Other critics, however, could find only praise for the work: Algernon Swinburne spoke glowingly of its 'brilliant [...] exposition of character,' its 'dexterous [...] construction of incident,' and its 'happy [...] evolution of

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31 Ashley suggests that *Armada* (1866) and *The Fallen Leaves Series* (1879) made the critics 'cool' towards *The Moonstone* (1868) and *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880) (Wilkie Collins, p. 129).

32 Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 129.

event,' and M. W. Townsend considered it to be one of Collins's greatest works, along with *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, and *The Moonstone*.<sup>33</sup>

*Poor Miss Finch* (1872) was received with equally mixed responses. The *Saturday Review* disliked it, finding it suitable only for those who 'appreciate ingenuity, are indifferent to poetry, and unsusceptible of the ludicrous;' the *Athenaeum* found it 'not as good as the others,' but 'far too good a novel to have been written by anyone else;' whilst *Rose-Belford's* opined that 'as a work of art, it approaches perfection.'<sup>34</sup>

Frequently, then, the censure of one review is counterbalanced by the praise of another. Even such novels as those which are now considered to have been Collins's great failures rarely received unrelievedly damning reviews: *The New Magdalen* (1873), for example, was, it is true, 'feeble, false, and silly,' according to Swinburne, but only 'narrowly miss[ed] being a fine story,' from Edmund Yates's point of view; *I Say No* (1884) had a weak plot, but nevertheless was 'eminently readable;' and *The Legacy of Cain* (1888) was described in the *Saturday Review*, as a 'comparative failure,' but only because the reviewer expected more from Collins than he would have done from other authors.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, *Heart and Science* (1883) received slightly wary, but on the whole favourable reviews: 'he has hampered himself by trying to write with a purpose [...] but fortunately Mr. Wilkie Collins is far too experienced and too skilful a novelist to be able to allow himself to be dull,' proclaimed the *Athenaeum*. Less cautious were the *Academy* and the *Spectator*, who considered it, respectively, 'thoroughly readable and enthralling from its

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33 Unsigned review, *Putnam's Magazine* (New York), 16 (1870), 339-40; Mrs Oliphant, unsigned review, *Blackwood's Magazine*, 108 (1870), 628-31; Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 30 (1870), 52-53; Swinburne, 'Wilkie Collins'; Townsend, "'Cleverness Rather than Genius'"; all quoted in Page, pp. 187, 188, 182, 260, and 249, respectively.

34 Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 33 (1872), 181-83; D. E. Williams, unsigned review, *Athenaeum*, (1872), 202-03; J. L. Stewart, 'Wilkie Collins as a Novelist', *Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly and National Review*, 1 (1878), 586-601; all quoted in Page, pp. 198, 195, and 227, respectively.

35 Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Complete Works*, ed. by Sir Edmund Gosse and Thomas James Wise, The Bonchurch Edition (London: Heinemann, 1925-27), XV, p. 300; quoted in Marshall, p. 96; Edmund Yates, 'The Novels of Wilkie Collins', *Temple Bar*, 89 (1890), 528-32; Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 58 (1884), 665-66; both quoted in Page, pp. 227 and 219.

first page to its last,' and 'thoroughly interesting [and] none the worse for its propagandist purpose.'<sup>36</sup>

Only a very few of the later novels received uniformly hostile reviews: not even *The Two Destinies* (1876) was openly criticized by all its reviewers. Whilst it was, justifiably perhaps, described by the *Saturday Review*, as being 'an amazingly silly book, [...] almost silly enough to be amusing through its absurdity,' J. L. Stewart, in *Rose-Belford's Canadian Monthly and National Review*, seems to think quite fondly of it. *The Fallen Leaves* (1879) alone was the subject of anything approaching unqualified animadversion, being, to the *Spectator*, 'simply abhorrent', and, to the *Saturday Review*, 'as unpleasant as a story can well be.'<sup>37</sup> The latter reviewer, nevertheless, saw fit to dedicate over two thousand words to this 'unwholesome' story, knowing that, regardless of any criticisms he might make, Collins and his novels would still be subjects of great interest to his readers.

Collins's critics were, then, nowhere near so unanimously vituperative as modern authorities choose to imply. As Jenny Bourne Taylor observes:

Both author and works tend to be discussed in a degenerative framework [...]: Collins's poor health, his accelerating gout and increasing dependence on laudanum, the withdrawal of the benign influence of Dickens with his death in 1870, and the ascendancy of the supposed detrimental effects of his growing friendship with Reade, can be pressed into service to make Collins seem like a figure in one of his own narratives, gradually growing weaker, his writing becoming more and more feeble, and defaced by blots.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps it is for this reason—the need to reinvent Collins as one of his own creations—that modern critics are so reluctant to believe that the master of the sensation novel

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<sup>36</sup> E. D. Cook [attributed], unsigned review, *Athenaeum* (1883), 538-39; Unsigned review, *Academy*, 23 (1883), 290; J. A. Noble, from an unsigned review, *Spectator*, 56 (1883), 679-81; all quoted in Page, pp. 214, 213, and 217, respectively.

<sup>37</sup> Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 43 (1877), 89-90; Stewart, 'Wilkie Collins as a Novelist'; Townsend, "Cleverness Rather than Genius"; Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 48, (1879), 148-49; all quoted in Page, pp. 204, 228, 252, and 205, respectively.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, 'Nineteenth-Century Psychology', p. 241.

could possibly have met with anything less than a sensationally good or a sensationally bad reception from his contemporary critics. Whilst these reviewers were demonstrably ambivalent in their opinions, it is more modern critics who would seem to have been somewhat selective in their reading of these articles, and who have, on the strength of this partial, or biased, information, decided to condemn Collins's later works out of hand.

*Man and Wife*, which received such varied criticism in its day, has suddenly become a terrible novel: '[it] marks the decline of Collins's work as a novelist,' laments Sheila Smith; '[it] would have had a more lasting success if Collins had disciplined his tendency to batter and revile and set the shocking details in a plausible framework,' counsels Sue Lonoff; and William Marshall observes that it is 'hovering at the edge of mediocrity,' with little if any chance of redemption. Only Robert Ashley dares to admit that he considers it to be one of Collins's 'five major novels.'<sup>39</sup> *Poor Miss Finch*, we learn from Marshall, was 'regarded by the critics in both Collins' day and our own as generally contrived,' and 'in the years since the publication of the novel and the death of Collins, the one question of intellectual significance posed by the novel has probably been obscured by the contrivance of the plot.'<sup>40</sup> There may be some truth in Marshall's opinion, but it would seem clear that he has carefully omitted any study of the reviews in *Rose-Belford's*, or even the *Athenaeum* (both mentioned above), when formulating his judgment.

By the same token, the favourably reviewed *Heart and Science* has mysteriously metamorphosed into what Marshall considers to be 'perhaps Collins' most unfortunate work.' Lonoff notes, with questionable accuracy, that 'after a flurry of attention, it sank into deserved obscurity.'<sup>41</sup> Again, only Ashley seems to give an objective picture, when he says that,

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39 Sheila Smith, 'Mid-Victorian Novelists', in *The Victorians*, The Penguin History of Literature Series, ed. by Arthur Pollard (London: Sphere Books 1969; revised, Penguin, 1987), pp. 239-86 (p. 267); Lonoff, p. 97; Marshall, p. 85; Ashley, 'Wilkie Collins Reconsidered', p. 268.

40 Marshall, p. 93.

41 Marshall, p. 104; Lonoff, p. 78.



*Heart and Science* was the result of a deliberate attempt by Collins to write the kind of novel then in favour with both critics and public, the realistic novel of character and humour. This endeavour to emphasise character and humour won Collins greater popular and critical acclaim than he had received for many years and made *Heart and Science* his best novel of the 'eighties.<sup>42</sup>

Marshall is incensed because he feels Collins has been less than honest: 'though protesting in the Preface to the first edition that he had used reliable sources, he ventured into an area of dispute, the controversy over vivisection, in which his opinions were based upon sentiment and inclination rather than upon understanding,' a view also expressed by Dougald MacEachen. Heller, too, objects to the novel on the grounds that it is 'as if he were aware there was no place else to go with his narrative,' and by re-using old ideas produces 'a pastiche of fragments, stitched together like Frankenstein's monster, that no longer have the vitality and coherence of earlier incarnations.' Once more, it is Ashley who, albeit reluctantly this time, admits that the novel has a certain merit: the characters, Benjulia in particular, are well-developed, and 'in achieving an effective balance of plot, character, and humour, it came closer to *The Moonstone* than any other novel of the emeritus period.'<sup>43</sup>

Of the later novels, only *The Law and the Lady* (1876), which was somewhat under-reviewed in its day, has managed to achieve respectability. Ashley condones it because he is able to make a case for its being 'more appropriately considered among Collins's sensation novels,' and there is even 'justification enough for a niche in the 'whodunit' hall of fame.' Catherine Peters, who considers *The Law and the Lady* to be 'one of the strangest, and in some ways one of the most interesting, novels [Collins] ever wrote,' does not concur with Ashley's evaluation of it as a detective story: 'its inferiority to the novels of his vintage years lies chiefly in the careless handling of the plot,' she maintains; 'either

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42 Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 116.

43 Marshall, pp. 104-05; Dougald B. MacEachen, 'Wilkie Collins' *Heart and Science* and the Vivisection Controversy', *Victorian Newsletter*, 29 (1966), 22-25; Heller, p. 168; Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 116.

Wilkie lost interest in the detective element of the story, or he wanted to focus the reader's attention on something else.' She does not say what this something else might be, but she does admit that as 'an exploration of irrational behaviour and the psychological motivation behind it, [it] is in some ways an advance on anything he had done before.'<sup>44</sup>

*The Fallen Leaves* (1879), which was perhaps over-reviewed considering its subject matter, has, on the whole, maintained its unpopularity throughout the years. Marshall and Robinson regard it as Collins's least successful novel, Ashley describes it as 'a pretty silly book,' and all three concur in their relief that no sequel followed the first volume. The voice of dissent this time comes from Philip O'Neill, who has set himself the task of championing this little-appreciated work. He exhorts 'the more perspicacious reader' to take issue with the opinion held by Marshall, Robinson, Ashley, and the whole of the Victorian establishment, who, he insists, have deliberately misread the novel: 'the themes and concerns of the novel are explicit and sometimes, are recognised by the critics. Yet they fail to take them seriously [and] to appreciate his [Collins's] project or treat it as a work of ideas.'<sup>45</sup>

Reception of the later novels was thus mixed, and this is hardly surprising given the amount that Collins wrote, and the length of his career. His first published novel, *Antonina*, appeared in 1850, and his literary output continued until his death in 1889, his last novel, *Blind Love*, being finished, at Collins's request, by his old friend Walter Besant. His career as a novelist lasted longer than that of Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, George Eliot, or Thomas Hardy. Inevitably there were fluctuations both in the quality of work and in his resultant popularity during his long career, but these were much less dramatic than has sometimes been suggested, and by no means confined

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<sup>44</sup> Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, pp. 121, 122; Peters, pp. 371, 372.

<sup>45</sup> Marshall, p. 102; Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* (London: John Lane (Bodley Head), 1951), p. 291; Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 115; O'Neill, p. 32.

to his later novels. In fact, the general inclination of modern scholarship has been to overstate the occasional coolness of the Victorian press and public towards Collins. As Bradford Booth has illustrated, Collins endured the same peaks and troughs in popularity as many other Victorian writers, not because his reading public deserted him, but because of the vagaries of the publishing industry.<sup>46</sup>

In the 1870s and 1880s Collins did, in fact, retain much of his popularity as a novelist. Naturally, some works sold better than others: *Poor Miss Finch* and *The New Magdalen*, for example, had comparatively disappointing sales, but *Man and Wife*, which increased the circulation of *Cassell's Magazine* to over 70,000, was immediately reprinted after selling out in a first edition of 1,000 copies, and *The Evil Genius* (1886) earned Collins more money than any other novel. The later novels were translated into several European languages as soon as they appeared in print in England, and continued to sell well in their countries of destination.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, in an article published in *London Society* in 1889, H. Chartres notes that when the *Pall Mall Gazette* held a ballot in 1884 to determine the most popular writer, Collins topped the poll.<sup>48</sup>

Whilst many of Collins's contemporaries have long been consigned to oblivion, Collins and his works are still remembered, inasmuch as his novels of the 1860s have survived the test of time (although only *The Woman in White* has ever been granted canonical status). Nevertheless, the prevailing—albeit inaccurate—view, expressed by William Marshall, is that 'not only did the man outlive his genius, but the uneven shadows of his failure in the last years have absorbed for posterity the brightness of his earlier

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<sup>46</sup> Booth, pp. 131-43.

<sup>47</sup> See Lonoff, p. 97, and Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, pp. 129-30.

<sup>48</sup> See Sheila Smith and Peter Denman, 'Mid-Victorian Novelists', *The Victorians*, p. 268; and Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 130.

When Dilys Winn carried out a survey for *Murderess Ink* (New York: Bell, 1979) almost a century later, asking her readers which dead novelists they would like to entertain at dinner, Collins shared first place with Edgar Allan Poe (p. 6).

attainments.’<sup>49</sup> It is, then, my contention that this denigration is unjust, and that Collins’s later novels are worthy of greater acclaim than has—for the past half-century at least—been accorded them.



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49     Marshall, p. 93.

## INTRODUCTION



This thesis seeks to rehabilitate Collins's later novels by showing their literary merits and making a case for them as worthy of consideration in their own right, rather than dismissing them as merely pale imitations of their precursors. What is most interesting about these works is the way in which they reverse many of the perspectives from which the Victorian era is often viewed and work against the grain of contemporary culture and its values. Collins's men—who, in the author's world, are often weak and infantilized, or selfish and effeminized—and his women, who frequently manipulate those around them in truly machiavellian style—may occupy 'separate spheres', but by compulsion rather than by inclination. His fallen women, far from being eternally damned, are granted redemption and a position in society. Marriage and motherhood, those twin pinnacles of feminine fulfilment, are shown to be, on the one hand, attainable for all regardless of their misdeeds, and, on the other, fraught with danger and uncertainty, even—or perhaps especially—for those who enter into those conditions innocently and with the purest of motives. Heroes and villains become indistinguishable: his good characters are, as I shall show, frequently as guilty of manipulation, deceit, and self-interest as are their wicked counterparts, and his villainous ones often possess surprising reserves of sincerity, honesty, and altruism. Moreover, all these novels are laden with anxieties and ambiguities about the binary oppositions of good/evil, masculine/feminine, and adult/child. By creating equally flawed heroes and villains, Collins enables the reader to see that morality, gender, and

maturity are not something natural and fixed, but synthetic and malleable. His concern with the sublation of these pairs of terms is potentially very dangerous, since it not only reveals the superficiality of these definitions, but also challenges their worth from within their accepted representations and perceptions. What these later novels reveal, then, is a surprisingly radical writer using the conventions of popular fiction to interrogate some of the commonly held values and assumptions of his day.



Collins's detractors have long been at pains to highlight the differences between his better known earlier works and his late fiction, and, in their eagerness to seize upon these contrasts as evidence of the inferiority of the latter, they frequently overlook the areas in which Collins has remained faithful to his original scheme; despite his occasional incursions into the fields of Scottish law, the redemption of the fallen woman, and religious prejudice, the later novels do, in fact, contain more of the essential elements of sensation fiction than these critics like to acknowledge: crime, perversion, secrecy, and the more sinister aspects of human behaviour. Nevertheless, there are some salient differences between his early and mid-period fiction and his later works in terms of narrative procedure and central focus. No longer is he so concerned with baffling his readers with labyrinthine plots and multiple narrators. As he told us in the Preface to the 1860 edition of *The Woman in White*,

An experiment is attempted in this novel, which has not (so far as I know) been hitherto tried in fiction. The story of the book is told throughout by the characters of the book. They are all placed in different positions along the chain of events; and they all take the chain up in turn, and carry it on to the end.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (London: Chapman Hall, 1859-60; repr. New York: Dutton, 1972; New York: Penguin, 1974; and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), Preface.

After ten years of the same experiment, both he and his readers were ready for something new. His early explanation of this narrative dissolution is essentially plausible:

When [one character] happens to be more closely connected than others with the incidents to be recorded, he will describe them in his own person. When his experience fails, he will retire from the position of narrator; and his task will be continued, from the point at which he has left it off, by other persons who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge, just as clearly and positively as he has spoken before them. (*WW*, Preamble)

Nevertheless, it must have been becoming increasingly obvious that the constant selection and reselection of character owed less to an exploration of different perspectives than to Collins's desire to keep his readers guessing. As early as 1862, he was aware that his detractors felt he relied too much on obfuscation and mystery, declaring in the Preface to *No Name* that:

It will be seen that the narrative related in these pages has been constructed on a plan, which differs from the plan followed in my last novel, and in some other of my works published at an earlier date. The only Secret contained in this book, is revealed midway in the first volume. From that point, all the main events of the story are purposely foreshadowed, before they take place—my present design being to rouse the reader's interest in following the train of circumstances by which these foreseen events are brought about. In trying this new ground, I am not turning my back in doubt on the ground which I have passed over already. My one object in following a new course, is to enlarge the range of my studies in the art of writing fiction, and to vary the form in which I make my appeal to the reader, as attractively as I can.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst many modern critics appear to applaud Collins's decision to follow a 'new course', his contemporaries either overlooked his endeavour, or were too busy being horrified by what they perceived as the coarseness and vulgarity of its heroine to pay particular heed to his stated project. According to Alexander Smith, who, had he

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<sup>2</sup> Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (London: Sampson Low, 1862; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Preface.

understood Collins's intention, would have found all but the first quarter of the novel very dull indeed:

To go to bed after the perusal of the *Woman in White* or *No Name*, is like going to bed after supping on a pork-chop. Mr Collins can hide a secret better than any man, he is a master of mystery; but when once the secret is discovered, when once the mystery is unravelled, his books collapse at once, their interest perishes, they are flat as conundrums to which you have the answers.<sup>3</sup>

H. F. Chorley was equally unimpressed. After thoroughly assassinating the character of *No Name's* heroine, he went on to criticize the number of catastrophes and coincidences, which, with the more straightforward narrative structure of the novel, appear so glaringly apparent.<sup>4</sup>

This was the first and last time Collins attempted to reveal a book's secret at such an early point in the story. Perhaps because he felt that he had overreached himself, or that his readers were not ready to venture with him on to this 'new ground', in his next two novels, *Armadale* and *The Moonstone*, Collins returned to the familiar territory of multiple narratives, secret identities, and withheld information.

As he and his prose matured, however, Collins was able, if not to abandon, certainly to limit his need to hide behind a series of 'disguises' in order to tell his story and to maintain his readers' interest, and his fiction supports the Bakhtinian view of the novel as something 'ever questing, ever examining itself, and subjecting its established forms to review.'<sup>5</sup> Present still are the puzzles and secrets, but in terms of limiting his readers' perceptions to those of the characters who provide each successive account of the story, the later novels show much greater restraint: *Heart and Science* and *Blind Love* are told, from start to finish, by an omniscient third person narrator, whilst *Man*

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3      Unsigned review, *North British Review*, 38 (1863), 183-85; quoted in Page, pp. 140-41.

4      Unsigned review, *Athenaeum* (1863), 10-11; quoted in Page, pp. 131-34.

5      Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 155.



*and Wife*, *The New Magdalen*, *The Fallen Leaves*, *'I Say No'*, and *The Evil Genius* are also written in the third person, with one or two interruptions in the form of confessions and letters. *Poor Miss Finch*, *The Law and the Lady*, *The Two Destinies*, and *Jezebel's Daughter* rely in the main on a first person narrator, who, likewise, allows him- or herself to be interrupted, once or twice, by written testimonies from other characters. Only *The Black Robe* and *The Legacy of Cain* come close to rivalling the novels of the 1860s with regard to multiplicity of narrators, and even they cannot compete with *The Moonstone* which is able to boast almost a dozen narrators, all of whom prevent our discovery of the truth, whilst tacitly claiming, along with the lawyer, Bruff, to be 'in a position to throw the necessary light on certain points of interest which have thus far been left in the dark.'<sup>6</sup> Moreover, when Collins does employ multiple narrators in his later novels, his purpose is less one of concealment/revelation than one of offering a psychological insight into the motivations and compulsions of his characters.

It has, I feel, been a mistake on the part of some critics to dismiss the later novels as inferior to those of the 1860s simply because the narrative structure of the later works is less complex. What they have chosen to interpret as a weakening of Collins's novelistic skills is, I would suggest, another attempt on his part 'to enlarge the range of my studies in the art of writing fiction, and to vary the form in which I make my appeal to the reader, as attractively as I can.' His overall project is, in fact, more elaborate than has often been allowed, and his concern, in his later works, is not with labyrinthine plots and intricately structured narratives, but with his society's tendency, firstly to label, and then to dismiss those individuals whose behaviour or circumstances appears to place them within a certain category. By reinforcing these stereotypes and their antitheses, Collins lulls his more complacent readers—both contemporary and modern—into a false sense of security and of shared superiority. His subsequent blurring of definitions and undermining of conventional judgments must surely have shocked his nineteenth-century readers, who believed him to be upholding the received

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6 *The Moonstone* (London: Tinsley, 1868; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), *The Story*, Second Period, Second Narrative, Ch. I.

wisdom of the day, as much as they disconcert his twentieth- and twenty first-century ones, whose blithe assumptions that here is but another patriarchally-minded Victorian have been so radically disturbed. Collins's somewhat uncanny—I use the word in the Todorovian rather than the Freudian sense—recreation of societal norms, coupled with his distorting and dismantling of complacently accepted perspectives, shows considerably greater finesse than can be discerned in his earlier fiction.

Another sign of his maturity is that he no longer feels he has to divulge the book's secret amidst, as it were, a fanfare of trumpets. Although there is no shortage of those elements which went to make up his sensation fiction—lost letters, shameful secrets, devious schemes, duped innocents, and cunning impostors—Collins's revelation of them is more subtle. Rather than rely on startling denouements and spectacular *Wendepunkte*, his disclosures are made gradually, creepingly, throughout the novel. The puzzle is no longer *what* will be discovered, but *how* each successive discovery will fuse together to make a whole.

This change in technique may, in fact, account for the hostility of some modern authorities towards the later novels. Whereas the ideas of the novels had once had a clearly defined point of convergence, on which the attention of these critics could be focused, in the later novels, Collins presents the reader with something which is at once homogenized and diffuse. A comparison of the scene in *No Name* following Magdalen Vanstone's accidental discovery that she is illegitimate (the 'Secret' to which Collins referred in his Preface) and the ones in *The Legacy of Cain* where Eunice Gracedieu learns firstly that she is adopted, and subsequently that she is the child of a convicted murderess, rather than the sister of one who merely attempted that crime, will illustrate this point. In the first of these scenes, the lawyer Mr Pendril has just revealed the circumstances of Magdalen and her sister Norah's birth to Miss Garth, the governess:

'God help me, what am I to do!' she [Miss Garth] broke out. 'How am I to tell them?'

'There is no need to tell them,' said a voice, behind her. 'They know it already.'

She started to her feet; and looked round. It was Magdalen who stood before her—Magdalen who had spoken those words.

Yes, there was the graceful figure, in its mourning garments, standing out tall and black and motionless against the leafy background. There was Magdalen herself, with a changeless stillness on her white face; with an icy resignation in her steady grey eyes.

‘We know it already,’ she repeated, in clear, measured tones. ‘Mr Vanstone’s daughters are Nobody’s Children; and the law leaves them helpless at their uncle’s mercy.’

So, without a tear on her cheeks, without a faltering tone in her voice, she repeated the lawyer’s own words, exactly as he had spoken them. Miss Garth staggered back a step, and caught at the bench to support herself. Her head swam; she closed her eyes in a momentary faintness. When they opened again, Magdalen’s arm was supporting her, Magdalen’s breath fanned her cheek, Magdalen’s cold lips kissed her. She drew back from the kiss; the touch of the girl’s lips thrilled her with terror.

As soon as she could speak, she put the inevitable question. ‘You heard us,’ she said. ‘Where?’

‘Under the open window.’

‘All the time?’

‘From beginning to end.’

She had listened—this girl of eighteen, in the first week of her orphanage, had listened to the whole terrible revelation, word by word, as it fell from the lawyer’s lips; and had never once betrayed herself! From first to last, the only movements which had escaped her, had been movements guarded enough and slight enough to be mistaken for the passage of the summer breeze through the leaves!

‘Don’t try to speak yet,’ she said, in softer and gentler tones. ‘Don’t look at me with those doubting eyes. What wrong have I done? When Mr Pendril wished to speak to you about Norah and me, his letter gave us our choice to be present at the interview, or to keep away. If my elder sister had decided to keep away, how could I come? How could I hear my own story, except as I did? My listening has done no harm. It has done good—it has saved you the distress of speaking to us. You have suffered enough for us already; it is time we learnt to suffer for ourselves. I have learnt. And Norah is learning.’

‘Norah!’

‘Yes. I have done all I could to spare you. I have told Norah.’

She had told Norah! Was this the girl, whose courage had faced the terrible necessity from which a woman old enough to be her mother had recoiled, the girl Miss Garth had brought up? the girl whose nature she had believed to be as well known to her as her own?

‘Magdalen!’ she cried out passionately, ‘you frighten me!’

Magdalen only sighed, and turned wearily away.

‘Try not to think worse of me than I deserve,’ she said. ‘I can’t cry. My heart is numbed.’ (NN, *The First Scene*, Ch. XIV)

In these five hundred words, all the major elements of Magdalen’s character, and, by extension, of the novel, are encapsulated: we learn that Magdalen possesses great emotional strength (she does not succumb to a fit of the vapours upon hearing the terrible news); that she has a devious side to her character (she will stoop to eavesdropping for expediency’s sake); that she will be shunned by those closest to her (Miss Garth flinches at her kiss); that she is kind (she saves Miss Garth the anguish of breaking the sad news to Norah) but that her kindness is tinged with a curious form of pragmatism (her listening at windows has, she feels, saved everyone a lot of trouble); that even those who suspect they know her best may be mistaken (Miss Garth is clearly bemused); and that the tragedy has made her immune to feeling and sentiment (her heart is numbed). Indeed, as Collins promised, ‘all the main events of the story are purposely foreshadowed, before they take place.’

In *The Legacy of Cain*, however, the signposting is much less evident. Eunice, by now engaged to be married, makes the first part of her discovery from the Prison Governor, who, after some deliberation about exactly how much of the truth he should tell, finds that ‘rashness prevailed and prudence yielded:’

‘Rouse your courage, dear Eunice; you are no more affected by Helena’s disgrace than I am. You are not her sister. Her father is not your father; her mother was not your mother. I was present, in the time of your infancy, when Mr Gracedieu’s fatherly kindness received you as his adopted child. This, I declare to you both, on my word of honour, is the truth.’

How she bore it, I am not able to say. My foolish old eyes were filling with tears. I could just see plainly enough to find my way to the door, and leave them together.

In my reckless state of mind, I never asked myself if Time would be my accomplice, and keep the part of the secret which I had not revealed—or be my enemy, and betray me.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Legacy of Cain* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1888; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1993), Ch. LXIII.

How Magdalen bore her situation we know, because it is spelt out for us, by the third person narrator. The truth of Eunice's origins is conveyed concisely, almost peremptorily, in the simple, short sentences of the Governor's direct speech. Her suffering, however, remains hidden behind the old man's tears, and it is only as the story progresses that we are able to judge how Eunice was affected by this revelation, and, indeed, what perfidy may or may not be perpetrated by Time.

The next part of Eunice's discovery, that she is the child of a woman hanged for the murder of her husband, is related with an economy of words. We have known for several chapters that Mrs Tenbruggen, a machiavellian character who has sworn revenge on the child, has entrusted to the innocent Miss Jillgall a letter in which, Collins hints, are explained the circumstances of Eunice's birth. When she asks for its return, the Prison Governor fears the worst. Again, he is the narrator:

I had my own suspicions of what that letter might contain; and I regretted that Miss Jillgall had sent it back without first waiting to consult me. My misgivings, thus excited, were increased by more news of no very welcome kind. Mrs Tenbruggen had decided on returning to her professional pursuits in England.  
(LC, Ch. LXIV)

We are never, in fact, told that Mrs Tenbruggen has revealed to Eunice what we already know to be true, much less are we privy to the details of that revelation, but when, later in this chapter, the Governor reveals that he 'detected signs of care' in her face, we know that the deed has been done.

This is a curious reversal. Just as once Collins allowed his characters to keep secrets from his readers, now he appears to be presenting those same readers with the secrets long before his characters are permitted to have even the slightest hint of any anomaly in their lives. Because of this, he is able to make his revelations in a less dramatic, more cursory, manner. Whilst there may have been suggestions of this kind of dramatic irony in his earlier works, it is only in the later novels that Collins uses it so prominently and so consistently. I shall return to this in my discussion of *The Two Destinies* in the next chapter.



The first chapter of this thesis, entitled 'Good Girls', looks at Collins's seemingly typical heroines in *Heart and Science*, *The Two Destinies*, and *Man and Wife*. Rather than promote the ailing angel as the epitome of female desirability, however, Collins reveals that a woman who conforms to this image is, in the first of these novels, little more than a liability on those who care for her, and in the second, a fantasy of male imagination, whilst in the third, the innocent but despoiled 'heroine' is revealed to possess even greater reserves of manipulation and deviousness than the man who brought about her fall. The reader's comfortable acceptance of the sweet *ingénue* is gradually and subtly undermined as Collins turns the tables and provides an alternative perspective on the appearance of artless femininity.

The second chapter, 'Fallen Women', illustrates Collins's preoccupation with his society's hypocritical attitude to those women who have transgressed the accepted moral code. It is not my intention here merely to judge Collins as a novelist who chooses to write about immorality, sexual desire, and, in particular, sexually active women, thus scandalizing his staid and moral readers, nor do I wish to imply that Collins simply establishes an image of Victorian morality or convention with no other object in mind than its subversion. His view is clear, and surprisingly modern in many respects: those who find themselves in this unfortunate situation are often blameless, and their fall was caused either by the ignorance forced upon them by 'respectable' society, or as a result of a deprived upbringing. Unaware of their sins until it is too late, they find themselves in a hostile world where they are condemned without trial, and without appeal. Collins, however, is able to see beyond this labelling, and, in *The Evil Genius*, *The New Magdalen*, and *The Fallen Leaves*, places the blame not, as many of his contemporaries do, on his transgressive heroines, but on the society which conspires to prevent their reclaiming their lost virtue.

The third chapter, 'Wicked Creatures', examines the way in which Collins subverts and parodies certain images idealized or anathematized by his peers. In '*I Say No*' he

initially provides his reader with a study of what were believed to be the negative aspects of the racial other, only, ultimately, to prove the unreliability of such assumptions: his characters may not be wholly virtuous, but their ethnicity has no bearing on their misdeeds. *Blind Love* challenges the novelistic representation of the impetuous young girl who is prepared to make any sacrifice for the man she loves, replacing her with a facsimile who causes nothing but mayhem and death around her as she pursues her own selfish infatuation. *The Legacy of Cain* takes as its theme the contemporary nature/nurture debate, and the concomitant fear of hereditary evil, complicated at times by supernatural episodes. As implied in the preceding chapter, Collins's inclination is pro-nurture, and he clearly derives great satisfaction from confounding his reader's attempts to identify the 'good' sister and the 'tainted' one. The final novel in this chapter, *Jezebel's Daughter*, concentrates on what was perceived as being the purest embodiment of love, that of a mother for her child, twisting and distorting it into a murderous desperation. By appearing to state the case for the prosecution of these Wicked Creatures, Collins, with his legal training, then dismantles his own argument, proving them to be innocent of the charges levied against them.

The final chapter, 'Other Men', concentrates upon *Poor Miss Finch*, *The Black Robe*, and *The Law and the Lady*. The belief in male supremacy is, in all these novels, shown to be at once illusory and undesirable. Moreover, Collins is not so pusillanimous as to bestow deformities and disabilities only on his villains, as punishment for their crimes (although he does ensure that these infirmities will not be passed on to future generations), and challenges his reader to accept the proposition that moral frailty is not the inevitable corollary of physical weakness.

In 'A Petition to the Novel-Writers', an early article for *Household Words*, Collins suggested a revision of the stereotypical depictions of heroines and villainesses:

I know that it is a rule that when two sisters are presented in a novel, one must be tall and dark, and the other short and light. I know that five feet eight of female flesh and blood, when accompanied by an olive complexion, black eyes, and raven hair, is synonymous with strong passions and an unfortunate destiny. I know that five feet nothing, golden ringlets, soft blue eyes, and a lily

brow, can not possibly be associated with any thing but ringing laughter, arch innocence, and final matrimonial happiness [...] Although I know it to be against all precedent, I want to revolutionize our two favourite sisters. Would any bold innovator run all risks and *make them both alike in complexion and stature*? Or would any desperate man [...] effect an entire alteration by *making the two sisters change characters*? [...] It might be a dangerous experiment to make this change; but it would be worth trying.<sup>8</sup>

Although Collins refers here to 'sisters', his argument holds equally true when the siblings are changed to 'brothers'. In *Poor Miss Finch*, he successfully meets the challenges he had set both to the 'bold innovator', and to the 'desperate man': not only does he subvert the accepted paradigm by allowing the two brothers to begin life 'alike in complexion and stature', he further makes them 'change character' both in terms of an inversion of the stereotypical representation, and in terms of their exchange of identities within the story. By presenting one as at once exceptionally fair and exceptionally (and abnormally) dark—the medicine he must take to control his epilepsy has an unfortunate effect on his skin—and the other as ambiguously between the two, Collins makes it impossible for the reader complacently to adhere to the usual signifieds, and thus reveals the unreliability of external appearances. In *The Black Robe* the role of hero is split between two characters, both of whom appear, at first glance, to be maintaining all the tenets of patriarchal supremacy: one fights duels and is indulgent to his elderly relatives; the other rescues hapless priests from hostile natives and is generous to the tenants on his estates. Nevertheless, the first of these paragons is shown to be both mentally unstable, and effeminized almost to the point of homosexuality, and the second is so weak as to be ensnared into matrimony by two scheming women, neither of whom can be said to be particularly clever or even desirable. In *The Law and the Lady* not only is the ostensible hero threatened in his role as the central instigator of the action by the female protagonist who exhibits a disturbing tendency to usurp his authority; this bland, cowardly, (almost) able-bodied man is also described in such a way as to make him less attractive and compelling than the deformed maniac who attempts, in an outburst of misplaced lust, to assault his

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8 *Household Words*, 14 (1856), 481-85, my italics.



wife. In these three novels, then, Collins proves that even appearances of manliness are not to be trusted, for under the surface lies something much less acceptable, but much more human.



## Chapter One

### GOOD GIRLS



The second half of Victoria's reign was, for women, a time of upheaval. The mid-sixties cult of the Angel in the House had, by the end of the century, been superseded when the next generation of angels took to their wings, alighting in offices, at universities, and from motor vehicles. This metamorphosis was, of course, not without its anxieties: the magazines, popular fiction, and even the literature of the day became preoccupied with asking and answering questions about the true nature of 'woman's mission', the proper 'sphere' for women, the identifying features of the Girl of the Period, the New Woman, and their 'redundant' sisters. Understandably, interest in this transformation did not end with its completion, and much has continued to be written—both in praise and in condemnation—on the subject.

Whilst mid-nineteenth century fiction increasingly portrayed girls who refused to conform to the socially accepted and expected roles of wife and mother—or of dutiful spinster—as victims of an intolerant society, non-literary publications, and in particular those written by women, tended to assert that dissatisfaction with the role of women would only lead to greater dissatisfaction. Male writers, meanwhile, found the idea that women could be dissatisfied with their lot hard to comprehend. 'Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel,' opined William Acton in 1857, and women who did feel any other kind of passion, were regarded as 'unnatural,

ill and deviant'.<sup>1</sup> Whilst similar inclinations in a man were 'regrettable', they were at least 'normal' and therefore manly.

Twelve years later, however, John Stuart Mill could see that female submission might be simply the product of indoctrination:

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it remained the norm. Not until the emergence of the New Woman in the 1890s would conventional gender roles come under any real threat, with men encountering competition on their own ground—economically, socially, and sexually as well.

From at least the middle of the nineteenth century, however, one conventional assumption about femininity became subject to question by writers of fiction, who ceased to uphold the stereotype of the sexually ignorant female as an ideal and began to depict sexuality as closely associated with their heroines. Consequently, the Victorian novel treads a moral tightrope by attempting to create heroines who are at once sexually aware and experienced, and valid as role models. As these sexually enlightened heroines gradually became more prevalent over the years, many contemporary literary authorities found them increasingly distasteful because they believed the heroine of the novel should provide a behavioural model for the instruction of the young female reader. According to the author of a somewhat tongue-in-cheek article in *The Saturday Review*:

The heroine of fiction is, let us remember, the ideal woman of the period, the mould of form with which our young women naturally compare themselves. Her

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<sup>1</sup> William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations* (London: John Churchill, 1857).

<sup>2</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, with The Subjection of Women, and Chapters on Socialism*, ed. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 132.

example will outweigh, with them, all the exhortations of their guardians, and for them, therefore, there is the pleasant prospect of seeing the attractive qualities described, reproduced in their daughters and wards.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, texts produced by male authors, despite ostensibly wishing to challenge the hypocrisy of social insistence on marriage, spinsterhood, and conformity, from a late twentieth-/early twenty first-century point of view, more often than not promote rather than question fundamental assumptions about the asexuality, or at least the sexual passivity, of the 'good woman'. Tennyson's heroine, Ida, displays many undesirably unfeminine characteristics during adolescence, all of which she happily abandons when she marries and assumes her conventional role. Female-authored literature, meanwhile, also became more explicit about the sexuality of its heroines, even if that sexuality was portrayed as uncomfortable and problematic. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's coy, saccharine Lucy, soon to be the bigamous Lady Audley, is a calculating, hypocritical, and satirical ✓ version of the feminine ideal; whilst George Eliot sentences the feisty Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* ~~is~~ to a punitive, watery death, thus condemning her heroine without reprieve for an ill-considered and rapidly repented moment of moral weakness.

It was against this background that Collins was writing. Over the decades mentioned here, there were evidently many changes—social, economic, political—which we can assume affected the novel-reading public's outlook on life. There were, of course, many exceptions to the general move towards female emancipation, which itself was rarely reflected in views on sexual morality. As the attitudes reflected in contemporary reviews reveals, morality remained remarkably constant, and behaviour that was shocking at mid-century—be it in real life or in fiction—remained so throughout Collins's literary career.

The three novels examined in this chapter concentrate, as do many nineteenth-century novels, on their heroines' progress towards matrimony and, in some cases, virtue. This focus was vital, because the innocent girl (unlike the wife, who was only at risk from

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3 Unsigned review, 'Past and Present Heroines of Fiction', *Saturday Review*, 1448 (1883), 107-08.

domestic violence and matrimonial rape) was seen to be at grave risk from her own burgeoning sexuality. The novels discussed here are typical in that they focus on a young girl's graduation from girlhood to womanhood, but atypical in that, not only do they show that there are dangers which come from sources other than their protagonist's efflorescent libido; they also accept that their heroine's virginity may be sacrificed without her virtue being compromised.

As I have already illustrated, the legacy of Collins's sensation fiction is frequently discernible in his later works, just as his social purpose can be detected in his earlier fiction. According to Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble, the unusually large number of female characters employed in the sensation novel, and, I would add, in the majority of Collins's writings, allows the reader to query who precisely the heroine *is* in Victorian fiction. 'There are,' they say, 'three possible answers to this question: she is the ideal; she is the object of the hero's affections; she is the protagonist.'<sup>4</sup> The reader may, perhaps, be in a position of some doubt, but the treatment of the 'good' women and the 'bad' women in Collins's work clearly shows what his own answer would be. In each of the novels discussed here—*Heart and Science* (1883), *The Two Destinies* (1876), and *Man and Wife* (1870)—Collins's heroines fall, respectively, into these three categories: Carmina Graywell is the epitome of Victorian gentility; Mary Van Brandt inspires supernatural devotion from her childhood sweetheart; and Anne Silvester, whose conduct before the tale begins excludes her from the 'ideal', and whose misplaced affections preclude any reciprocal feeling from any easily identifiable 'hero', is, undoubtedly, the protagonist of her novel. Whilst these 'heroines' can be thus labelled and classified, it would seem to be a part of Collins's admonitory project to illustrate the hazards of labelling an individual, of being blinded by appearances, and of adhering too inflexibly to convention.

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<sup>4</sup> Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble, *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 20-21.



The first novel I wish to examine is *Heart and Science*, which begins when Ovid Vere, a promising young doctor suffering from exhaustion as a result of his extensive research into brain fever, falls in love at first sight with his cousin, Carmina Graywell. Ovid's mother, Mrs. Gallilee, has been appointed Carmina's guardian following the recent death of Carmina's father, who had been living in Italy for many years. Mrs Gallilee assumes that she will inherit a handsome legacy from her brother, but when the will is read, she learns that his entire fortune is to go to Carmina. Only if Carmina dies leaving no children will Mrs. Gallilee receive the fortune.

As soon as he has extracted a promise of marriage from Carmina, Ovid, like so many of Collins's heroes, promptly leaves the country, having been sent to Canada for the good of his health. Mrs Gallilee is now free to acquire her ward's fortune by whatever nefarious means she chooses. Carmina's delicate health deteriorates as a result of the harsh treatment which she receives from her aunt, coupled with her isolation from her beloved Ovid and her old nurse, Teresa. Attended by Mrs Gallilee's tame physician, Dr Null, whose name accurately indicates the extent of his medical competence, and the arch-vivisector and brain fever enthusiast, Dr Benjulia, who regards Carmina as a specimen in need of research rather than a patient in need of care, the girl's health rapidly declines into a state of hysterical catalepsy.

Ovid's young half-sister, Zoe, meanwhile, takes matters into her own hands, and writes to Ovid, begging him to come home. He returns to London just in time to restore Carmina's health, using the mysterious remedy for brain fever, entrusted to him by a dying mulatto doctor in Canada. When Benjulia realizes that the fame for discovering a cure for brain fever will go to someone else, he commits suicide by locking himself in his laboratory and burning the building down around him; Mrs. Gallilee, thwarted in her

schemes to acquire Carmina's money, also succumbs to brain fever; and Carmina and Ovid marry and lead a life of normative domestic bliss.<sup>5</sup>

The primary focus of Collins's thesis in *Heart and Science* centres on the dehumanizing effect of scientific advancement, and society's almost antinomian belief in man's superiority over both other species and the weaker members of his own. The relationships between the characters in the novel and their human concerns are frequently subordinated to the author's disquiet about the relationship between animals and humans in general, and scientific experiment in particular. Nor are Collins's preoccupations merely symptomatic of his age: indeed, in a way which is strikingly 'postmodern', what is human is not always dominant and pre-eminent, but frequently 'inhuman'—bestial, cruel, and grotesque. With a more modern setting, *Heart and Science* could easily have come from the imagination of Iain Banks, and it is surprising that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, readers and critics who might be expected to appreciate both this style of writing and the anti-vivisection cause the novel espouses, have failed to appreciate the book's true merit.

Vivisection was the *bête noire* of many socially aware Victorians, and towards the latter part of the century several bills, whose purpose was to regulate live animal experimentation, were read in parliament. The fifteen years prior to Collins's writing of *Heart and Science* saw the publication of a multiplicity of articles discussing the ethics of vivisection,<sup>6</sup> although it is probable that it was the case, in 1882, of David Ferrier,

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<sup>5</sup> Any of Collins's novels, when summarized, inevitably suffers, and it is proof, if proof be needed, of the author's enduring talent that he is able to produce such eminently engrossing and plausible stories from what appear to be such far-fetched and ridiculous plots.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, 'Physiological Experiments: Vivisection', *Westminster Review*, n. s. 29 (1866), 146-55; Edward A. Freeman, 'Field Sports and Vivisection', *Fortnightly Review*, n. s. 15 (1874), 618-29; Richard Congreve and J. H. Bridges, 'Vivisection', and Lewis Carroll, 'Some Popular Fallacies about Vivisection', *Fortnightly Review*, n. s. 17 (1875), 435-37 and 847-54, respectively; 'Thoughts of an Outsider: The Ethics of Vivisection', *Cornhill*, 33 (1876), 468-78; Robert Lowe, 'The Vivisection Act', *Contemporary Review*, 28 (1876), 723; Rev. George Greenwood, 'Vivisection', *Macmillan's*, 11 (1879), 523-30; Samuel Wilks, 'Vivisection: Its Pains and its Uses', *Nineteenth Century*, 10 (1881), 939; Lord Coleridge, 'The Nineteenth Century Defenders of Vivisection', Dr W. B. Carpenter, 'The Ethics of Vivisection', and Dr Gerald Yeo, 'The Practice of Vivisection in England', *Fortnightly Review*, n. s. 31 (1882), 225-36, 237-46, and 352-68, respectively. For a more modern perspective on the vivisection controversy, see Richard Deland French, *Antivivisection and Medical Science*

Professor of Forensic Medicine at King's College, London, charged under the Vivisection Act and acquitted, which inspired the novel.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the opinions of William Marshall, Dougald MacEachen, and Kenneth Robinson, all of whom accuse Collins of failing to understand his topic, he not only knew his subject, but also corresponded at length with the philanthropist and standard-bearer of the anti-vivisection movement, Frances Power Cobbe. Aware that his readers would not welcome too much detail, he informed her:

I shall leave the detestable cruelties of the laboratory to be merely inferred, and, in tracing the moral influence of those cruelties on the nature of the man who practises them, and the result as to his social relations with the persons about him, I shall be careful to present him [...] as a man *not* infinitely wicked and cruel, and to show the efforts made by his better instincts to resist the inevitable hardening of the heart [...] produced by the deliberately merciless occupations of his life.<sup>8</sup>

In this, Collins succeeds, although it is difficult to find Benjulia, the practitioner of vivisection, at all sympathetic, something which prompts Robert Ashley to inquire, 'did vivisection make Benjulia callous or did callousness make him a vivisectionist?'<sup>9</sup> Certainly, his scientific activities have in some ways affected his character, and he can no longer distinguish between man and animal, and, therefore, respects neither. As he tells his brother:

'Am I working myself into my grave, in the medical interests of humanity? *That* for humanity! I am working for my own satisfaction—for my own pride—for my own unutterable pleasure in beating other men—for the fame that will keep my name living hundreds of years hence. Humanity! I say with my foreign brethren—Knowledge for its own sake, is the one god I worship. Knowledge is

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*in Victorian Society* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 1975), and Sarah M. Theobald-Hall, 'At the Borders of Humanity: Animals, Women, and the Antivivisection Movement in Late Nineteenth-Century British Literature' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Tulsa, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Peters, p. 399.

<sup>8</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, *The Life of Frances Power Cobbe* (London: Swann Sonnenschein, 1904), II, p. 184; quoted in Peters, p. 399.

<sup>9</sup> Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 117.



its own justification and reward. The roaring mob follows us with its cry of Cruelty. We pity their ignorance. Knowledge sanctifies cruelty.’<sup>10</sup>

The god of Benjulia’s worship is not capitalized, for through science, Benjulia has, at least in his own estimation, achieved deification. The difference he acknowledges is not between human and animal, but between himself and the lesser mortals who surround him. Not to promote, but rather to refute this stance—a product of the unease engendered by Darwin’s evolutionary theory—Collins contrasts the over-sophistication of his educated characters with the more fundamental, animalistic qualities of his less cultured ones.<sup>11</sup> His contention, clearly, is that what is natural is good and humane, whereas what is man-made is, unless carefully controlled, pernicious and inhumane. Invariably, Collins was thorough in his research, and must have been familiar with Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, the vocabulary of which echoes throughout *Heart and Science*. Although he uses but few overt comparisons, the parallels between the four good characters in *Heart and Science* and their lower order compeers are evident. Carmina, Teresa, Miss Minerva, and Zoe are all portrayed as possessing far more animalistic qualities than human ones, whilst their wicked counterparts are at once absolutely human in their machinations, and absolutely inhuman in their treatment of others.

In depicting his heroine and her friends as animals, however, Collins is in no way reiterating the long-held belief that woman is nothing more than an animal in need of training. Indeed, in *Heart and Science*, he challenges this attitude, which views woman as either parasite or chattel, as vigorously as he challenges the antievolutionist

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10 Wilkie Collins, *Heart and Science* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1990), Ch. XXXII.

11 Michael Crichton’s *The Terminal Man* (London: Arrow, 1994), for example, is a more modern example of the writer’s fascination with man’s obsessive quest for scientific knowledge, although this writer is less scrupulous in his choice of vocabulary to portray the ‘detestable cruelties of the laboratory’. Despite being described on the cover of the paperback edition as ‘an all-too-believable modern *Frankenstein*,’ *The Terminal Man* is another cautionary tale of what happens when vivisectionists cease to distinguish between animal and human subjects. Like Collins, Crichton highlights the animalistic qualities of his innocent and bewildered characters, whilst indicating that those in control are—in this technological age—closer to machines than to animals.

hypothesis. With the exception of the frail, bird-like Carmina, all the animalized characters in the novel are independent and determined. They are also widowed, celibate, or too young to be married, and are not, therefore, the property of any man.

In Carmina Graywell Collins creates perhaps his most exaggerated version of the Victorian ideal. Following in the delicate and genteel footsteps of Laura Fairlie (*The Woman in White*) and Norah Vanstone (*No Name*), she is not only beautiful, albeit in an unconventional Italianate way,<sup>12</sup> childlike, sweet-natured, kind, demure, and a lover of small animals, she is also innocent to the point of stupidity, and her mental fragility is aesthetically paralleled by her physical weakness. To the late twentieth- or early twenty-first-century reader, she is bland and infuriating—Roger Dennis even goes so far as to comment that ‘the modern reader is generally relieved to have Carmina spend most of the [second half of the novel] in a coma, awakening from time to time to declare her love for Teresa and for Ovid’<sup>13</sup>—but for her contemporary readers her very purity and her passive, helpless, shrinking, feminine being represented the height of sex appeal. Strong men of the time grew wistful as they thought of this paragon: ‘Carmina is an admirable character—sweet, tender, and true—whose touch converts nearly everything and everybody to show their best sides,’ proclaimed the *British Quarterly Review* in 1886.<sup>14</sup> The fact that, out of the other significant characters in the novel, the majority shows no signs whatsoever of such a conversion is something which has clearly eluded this seemingly besotted reviewer.<sup>15</sup>

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12 ‘There was a delicacy of finish in her features—in the nose and the lips especially—a sensitive changefulness in the expression of her eyes [...], and a subtle yet simple witchery in her rare smile, which atoned, in some degree at least, for want of complexion in the face and of flesh in the figure [...] Grace and refinement; a quickness of apprehension and a vivacity of movement, suggestive of some foreign origin; a childish readiness of wonder, in the presence of new objects [...], a childish playfulness with persons whom she loved—were all characteristic attractions of the modest stranger’ (*HS*, Ch. III).

13 Roger W. Dennis, ‘Wilkie Collins and the Conventions of the Thesis Novel’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama, 1973), p. 402.

14 Unsigned review, ‘Novels of the Quarter’, *British Quarterly Review*, 78 (1886), 232.

15 One—Lemuel Benjulia—does not meet her. Four show no discernible effects, good or bad, from their contact with Carmina: Zoe simply likes all those who do not attempt to quash her natural exuberance, but displays no outstanding predilection towards her cousin; Maria maintains a carefully cultivated attitude of disdainful superiority, and throughout regards

Carmina is an archetypally anodyne and inoffensive heroine. Possibly out of revenge for the scathing treatment meted out by the critics to his previous heroines, Collins reacts by giving his attackers a heroine who so closely adheres to the ideal that she becomes little more than a caricature of the exemplary woman she purports to represent—a domestic animal rather than a 'domestic angel'. The *British Quarterly's* reviewer, as has been shown, remained oblivious to Collins's mockery of his favourite maiden. Her eventual collapse is not only another example of the parodic treatment to which Collins subjects his heroine, but is also, as I shall show, symptomatic of her avian nature. Although she succumbs to brain fever and spends much of the latter part of the novel in a state of only semi-consciousness, at no time is Carmina's mental frailty depicted as an abnormal state; rather it is simply an extreme—or perhaps an exaggerated—representation of the Victorian notion that a lady should be weak and sickly.<sup>16</sup> Gilbert and Gubar maintain that:

Nineteenth-century culture seems to have actually admonished women to *be ill*. In other words, the 'female diseases' from which Victorian women suffered

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Carmina as beneath her notice; Mr Null tries his desultory and uninformed best, but is hardly galvanized into action by his compassion for his young patient; and Mr Gallilee is eventually moved from his habitual passivity, not by Carmina's suffering, but by his wife's extravagant spending and unjust behaviour. A further three are actually inspired by her presence in their lives to vindictiveness or criminality: Nathan Benjulia is prepared, in his quest for knowledge, to break his Hippocratic oath, and allow Carmina to die of brain fever in order that he may have a human subject for his research; Mrs Gallilee will stop at nothing to secure Carmina's fortune for herself; and Mr Le Frank turns spy, having been belittled as a musician by the more talented Carmina.

It is also worth remarking that, in a clever reworking of the vivisection-mutilation theme, Le Frank is punished for his spying when, surprised in his snooping by Teresa, his hand is caught in the doors of the wardrobe he is examining, resulting in the amputation of two of his fingers, and the end of his career as a musician.

<sup>16</sup> Carmina's malady, brain fever, was a disease particularly attractive to writers of fiction because of its dramatic onset and long duration. It was not, however, an invention of these writers. In the nineteenth century both doctors and laymen were of the opinion that prolonged intellectual activity or a sudden emotional shock could lead to severe long-term illness. Certainly, and more frequently in fact than in fiction, brain fever could have fatal consequences. Modern research has revealed that the symptoms of this disease very closely resemble those of certain forms of encephalitis or meningitis. It was not, as Roger Dennis would have us believe, simply 'a nervous breakdown in modern terms' (p. 386). For a more accurate survey of brain fever and its fictional applications, see Audrey C. Peterson, 'Brain Fever in Nineteenth-Century Literature: Fact and Fiction', *Victorian Studies*, 19 (1976), 445-64

were not always byproducts of their training in femininity; they were the goals of such training.<sup>17</sup>

It was, then, as Dr Mary Putnam Jacobi observed:

[...] considered natural and almost laudable to break down under all conceivable varieties of strain—a winter dissipation, a houseful of servants, a quarrel with a female friend, not to speak of more legitimate reasons.<sup>18</sup>

Carmina's seizure can be attributed to several different 'varieties of strain': she—almost prophetically—witnesses the death, caused by the indifference of a cab driver, of a dog (*HS*, Ch. III); she goes, with Teresa, to a music hall where she observes her 'unknown aunt', a sight which, as Collins clearly wishes us to understand, is too distressing to be borne (*HS*, Ch. IV); she overhears an argument between Miss Minerva and Mrs Gallilee, which renders her 'quite prostrate' (*HS*, Ch. XXVI); she is taken to see an exhibition of conjuring, by the well-meaning Mr Gallilee, but it does her 'harm instead of good' (*HS*, Ch. XXXVI); and as if such encounters, altercations, and entertainments were not enough to drive any genteel young lady to the brink of insanity, Mrs Gallilee provides the final shove into that 'laudable' condition by informing Carmina that she is an 'impudent bastard [...] the child of an adulteress [...] the child of her mother's lover!' (*HS*, Ch. XLV) This news, which one of Collins's more dynamic and 'unfeminine' heroines would have regarded as a challenge to her honour, leaves the ladylike Carmina in a catatonic state:

A ghastly stare, through half-closed eyes, showed death in life [...] The shock had struck Carmina with a stony calm. She had not started, she had not swooned. Rigid, immovable, there she sat; voiceless and tearless; insensible even to touch; her arms hanging down; her clenched hands resting on either side of her. (*HS*, Ch. XLV)

As Elaine Showalter points out, madness in the nineteenth century was a 'female malady,' and the indicators of insanity—feeling, excess, emotionalism, irrationality,

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17 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 54.

18 Quoted in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1973), p. 19.

histrionics—were also signifiers of femininity.<sup>19</sup> Whilst many of Collins's heroines—if rather fewer of his heroes—lack these qualities, Carmina possesses them in abundance.

Carmina, however, has not simply lost her mind in an excess of feminine agitation. Her reaction to her aunt's spiteful pronouncement has caused her to recede not only into herself, but also into a more primitive state, into a sub-human region, more usually associated with primitive peoples and animals, especially birds, whose typical reaction to shock or threat is a similar form of psychosomatic paralysis. As Darwin observes:

With all or almost all animals, even with birds, Terror causes the body to tremble. [...] The breathing is hurried. The heart beats quickly, wildly, and violently; but whether it pumps the blood more efficiently through the body may be doubted, for the surface seems bloodless and the strength of the muscles soon fails. [...] The mental faculties are much disturbed. Utter prostration soon follows, even fainting. A terrified canary-bird has been seen not only to tremble and to turn white about the base of the bill, but to faint; and I once caught a robin in a room, which fainted so completely, that for a time I thought it dead.<sup>20</sup>

Significantly, it is in the bird-house at the Zoological Gardens that, at Teresa's instigation, Ovid, who Collins tells us, 'knew nothing of the devious and serpentine paths by which love finds the way to its ends,' 'kindly lowered himself' to Carmina's intelligence, in an attempt to 'interest her by talking the language of love' (*HS*, Ch. XIV). She, however, like the caged birds around them, is still wild and skittish and does not respond to such deliberate and condescending billing and cooing.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, in terms of truth and honesty, the unscrupulous Benjulia is shown in a slightly more

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<sup>19</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), pp. 1-20. For the positioning of the hysterical female within a political, historical, and culturally advancing society, see also Tiffany Ellen Drever, 'Medical Mysteries: Dragging the Victorian Hysteric into the Machine Age' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: John Murray, 1872; repr. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 77.

<sup>21</sup> Although Collins does not place excessive emphasis on the parallel between Carmina and the caged birds at the zoo, he makes it clear that this is the environment in which she feels most at ease. The other zoo animals repel her by their smell (*HS*, Ch. XIV), and human beings make her feel unsettled and inferior; only surrounded by birds is she able to show any positive or dynamic qualities which manifest themselves in her ministering to Ovid, who, after his declaration of love, faints from exhaustion.

favourable light than the supposedly virtuous Ovid. Benjulia does not attempt any form of artificial self-abasement as a means of seducing Carmina into trusting him; from start to finish he holds himself superior to her, and his interest in her is unquestionably that of the vivisector in any other living specimen. Resenting anything that takes him away from his research, he only considers her to be of the slightest consequence when her condition takes a turn for the worse:

The shock that had struck Carmina had produced complicated hysterical disturbance, which was now beginning to simulate paralysis. Benjulia's profound and practised observation detected a trifling inequality in the size of the pupils of the eyes, and a slightly unequal action on either side of the face. [...] Here, at last, was Benjulia's reward for sacrificing the precious hours which might otherwise have been employed in the laboratory! From that day, Carmina was destined to receive unknown honour: *she was to take her place, along with the other animals, in his note-book of experiments.* (HS, Ch. LII, my italics)

It is, however, not Benjulia, but Ovid, who eventually brings about Carmina's return to health. It is only a partial success: when Mr Gallilee observes that 'She still looks delicate, poor dear,' and enquires of Ovid whether her recovery is complete, he is told that she is 'As well as she will ever be. [...] Before I returned to her, time had been lost which no skill and no devotion can regain. [...] Past events which might have cast their shadow over all her life to come, have left no trace in her memory' (HS, Ch. LXIII).<sup>22</sup> Carmina's sensibility of feeling, her stupidity, coupled with her general ignorance and lack of sophistication were all prerequisites of the untainted feminine virtue, so prized on the Victorian marriage market, and at no point does Collins imply that Ovid has cause to regret his choice of bride.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Collins's depiction of the union

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<sup>22</sup> One feature of the later fiction is that much of what would, ten or twenty years earlier, have been grist for the sensation novel mill is now dismissed almost cursorily. Carmina's (partial) amnesia is one such example. Rather than have her loss of memory—and her attempts to retrieve what is forfeit—as a central focus for the novel, Collins merely depicts his heroine's plight as the culmination of prior, and more important, events. For the importance of the 'amnesiac self' in Collins's fiction, especially in his sensation novels, see Nicholas John Dames, 'Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia and the Evasion of Memory in British Fiction, 1810-1870' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> As Sally Mitchell observes, sheltering a young girl from the evils of the world required some effort:

A truly innocent girl knew nothing about the physical relations between the sexes; she was ignorant about the desires and practices of men; and therefore she could not understand many things that went on around her. To keep her innocent, she was never taken shopping along Bond Street or at the Burlington Arcade in the wrong hours. She

functions ironically, and one cannot help pitying poor Ovid that he should be bound to a wife of limited mental and physical prowess. Rather than finding a caring and compassionate wife with whom to share his life, Ovid has acquired a beautiful, exotic, caged bird, who will charm and fascinate by her close mimicry of human sounds.<sup>24</sup>

In many ways, Carmina recalls George Eliot's musical, orphaned, Italian, Caterina Sarti, who is treated as a pet by Sir Christopher Cheverel's family in *Mr Gilfil's Love-Story*. She, too, is a pretty caged bird, although Eliot is not so subtle as Collins in her analogy. When, for example, Caterina realizes that her love for the fickle Captain Wybrow is not reciprocated we are told in no uncertain terms that:

The poor bird was beginning to flutter and vainly dash its soft breast against the hard iron bars of the inevitable, and we see too plainly the danger, if that anguish should go on heightening instead of being allayed, that the palpitating heart may be fatally bruised.<sup>25</sup>

Collins takes this same bird analogy, but uses it subversively. Where Caterina is strong and active, Carmina is weak and passive. When Caterina's jealousy takes a firmer hold, she seizes a dagger with the intention of murdering Wybrow, and is only thwarted in her scheme by his premature death from natural causes. In this respect, she is closer kin to Carmina's old nurse, Teresa, than to the delicate, fluttery Carmina.

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was forbidden to read newspapers. She could not go for a walk or visit a friend or go to a lecture unless a chaperone were available; she could not do slum-visiting (even chaperoned) because of what she might learn. Preserving a girl's ignorance required continuous supervision and a carefully restricted physical environment. [...] A single woman [...] might show an interest in worldly affairs or take up slum-visiting when she reached twenty-five, on the assumption that by that age her value on the marriage market was pretty well gone (*The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women's Reading, 1835-1880* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), pp. 169-70).

24 Of course, a darker and more sinister interpretation of this marriage would ally Ovid far too closely with Benjulia for comfort. Rather than seeing him as Carmina's saviour, it is possible to view him as her creator. A latter-day Pygmalion, he is able to produce his idea of the 'perfect' woman, by treating her only up to the point of his choosing. Mrs Gallilee, who also suffers from brain fever, makes a complete recovery thanks to her capable son, but as Ovid has no intention of living with his mother after his marriage to Carmina, that is a permissible outcome. Ovid = a  
Carmina's p

25 *Scenes of Clerical Life* (London: Blackwood, 1858; repr. with *Silas Marner, The Lifted Veil, and Brother Jacob*, London: Blackwood, 1913), p. 173.

Teresa, is another character whose lack of learning and apparently sub-human savagery again ally her much more closely with the animal kingdom than with man. 'A dreadful woman; coarse, furious, a perfect savage' (*HS*, Ch. XLVII), she is at once a primitive human, an ape and some kind of nightmarish bird of prey. She is the hag-raven/beneficent saint of pagan mythology, who has the power to destroy and also to protect.<sup>26</sup> Compared with Carmina and Miss Minerva, Teresa plays a much smaller part in the action of the novel, although it is she who, in a murderous atavistic rage, attempts to strangle Mrs Gallilee when the latter impugns the circumstances of Carmina's birth. Hester Dethridge in *Man and Wife* also suffers from similar homicidal propensities, as I shall discuss later in this chapter. Poor Hester's eventual fate indicates that, within the conventions of the novel at least, she is a 'bad' character. Teresa, on the other hand, who, not content with having merely choked Mrs Gallilee senseless, further considers using one of her late husband's potions to poison the woman, is evidently a 'good' character whose actions are in no way censurable.<sup>27</sup> Her eventual promotion to housekeeper attests to this, for the noble Ovid would surely not wish to have a murderous recidivist in his employ. Of course, within Collins's moral framework, Teresa's behaviour is not criminal; it is instinctual. Animals, such as she, do not make moral choices; they merely do what is expedient to protect themselves and their young. Mrs Gallilee and Dr Benjulia, who are prepared, if not deliberately to kill Carmina, then certainly to allow her to die, are much more culpable inasmuch as they, as reasoning human beings, are aware of their deeds, and of the iniquity of them.

Carmina's second protector, Miss Minerva, is active, intelligent, and cultured. Nevertheless, she, too, is as much a member of the animal kingdom as Carmina and Teresa. By initially presented her to us in the guise of villainess, Collins cautions his readers that they should not allow themselves to be deceived by appearances and

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26 See Anne Ross, 'The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts', in *The Witch Figure*, ed. by Venetia Newall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 162.

27 Collins also supplies Madame Fontaine in *Jezebel's Daughter* with a similar concoction, formerly the property of her deceased husband, and furnishes Lydia Gwilt in *Armada* with a mysterious purple vial of obscure provenance.



labels. She is neither wicked, nor are her 'human' attributes anything more than an uneasily assumed disguise. We are warned, in somewhat sinister fashion, that 'the people about her felt an uneasy perception of something secret, ominously secret, in the nature of the governess which defied detection' (*HS*, Ch. V), and, unavoidably, given our knowledge of Collins's fertile and often macabre imagination, we find ourselves imagining that any one of a number of sins, from bigamy to murder, prostitution to blackmail, must be hidden in this character's past. When, eventually her secret is revealed to us—Miss Minerva is passionately in love with Ovid—we feel a certain sense of anti-climax. What has happened to Collins's favourite philosophy of 'make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait,' we wonder.<sup>28</sup> In fact, nothing has happened to it. Collins has surprised us, just as he has always done, only this time our reaction depends upon our misreading of the clues he has planted along the way. Instead of unearthing some heinous crime, we eventually discover a secret no worse than that possessed by many other women.

Just as Teresa is an amalgam of several animals, so Miss Minerva is a combination of the simian and the canine. We are told that:

Miss Minerva's eager sallow face, so lean, and so hard, and so long looked [...] as if it wanted some sort of discreet covering thrown over some part of it. Her coarse black hair projected like a penthouse over her bushy black eyebrows and her keen black eyes. (*HS*, Ch. V)

Despite these ape-like features, Miss Minerva more closely resembles a fierce guard dog, whose devotion and loyalty, once won, are unshakeable. Rather than labour his point, however, Collins chooses to underscore the difference between Miss Minerva and other, less natural, more sophisticated women of her age, by concentrating on her masculine attributes.

'It seems so formal to call you Miss Minerva,' [remarks Carmina.] 'I don't know what your Christian name is. Will you tell me?'

Miss Minerva replied rather unwillingly. 'My name is Frances. Don't call me Fanny!'

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28     Attributed to Collins by Bradford Booth, in 'Wilkie Collins and the Art of Fiction', p. 138.

‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s too absurd to be endured! What does the mere sound of Fanny suggest? A flirting, dancing creature—plump and fair, and playful and pretty! [...] Call me Frances—a man’s name, with the only difference between an i and an e. No sentiment in it; hard like me.’ (*HS*, Ch. XVI)

Her surname, too, has connotations of asexuality and masculinity. In Roman mythology, Minerva, as well as being the virginal goddess of wisdom and counsel, is also a goddess of war and is frequently depicted wearing the battle helmet of a male warrior. This partial masculinity serves not only to remove Miss Minerva as a viable rival for Ovid’s affections, but also to highlight the conventional image of female beauty against which she is unfavourably compared. Her masculine attributes, coupled with her *déclassé* status of governess, allow her to abjure some, if not all, of the limitations of her role, in terms of both sex and class, without compromising her virtuous nature in the eyes of the reader. Whilst she may question and refuse the dominant codes by asserting her equality of social status with her employer and—like Teresa, obeying the dictates of instinct rather than those of propriety—eavesdropping on Mrs Gallilee’s plots, her integrity, once established, remains intact until the end of the novel.

Having started as Carmina’s sworn enemy, she gradually becomes the adviser and confidante of the girl who has, from her point of view at least, usurped her position in Ovid Vere’s affections. Her change in attitude is as marked as that of Darwin’s dog in his chapter on ‘Antithesis’.<sup>29</sup> It is evident throughout that she loves Ovid with more passion than Carmina—who appears to love anyone who is not downright cruel to her—ever could, and yet she is prepared to sacrifice her true feelings in order to ensure the happiness of the two people who mean the most to her. Referring to the novelistic convention of rewarding the virtuous and punishing the villainous, Roger Dennis remarks that ‘Miss Minerva [alone] is left with only a victory over her self-passions as her reward.’<sup>30</sup> He is, of course, quite correct: Ovid and Carmina are married; Teresa is

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<sup>29</sup> *Expression*, pp. 50-56.

<sup>30</sup> Dennis, p. 390.

their housekeeper; Mr Gallilee and the children are safely established in Scotland; Mrs Gallilee is happily 'At Home to Science'; Benjulia is dead; and all the less important characters have been allowed to resume their old lives once more. Only Miss Minerva appears to go almost unrewarded for her virtuous self-sacrifice, having only the small consolation of knowing that Ovid and Carmina's first child is named after her. Nevertheless, this, I would argue, is the only possible outcome for a woman whose true role in life is to be the guard-dog and protector of her chosen master and mistress.<sup>31</sup>

Arguably, however, the true, if overlooked, heroine of the novel is Ovid's youngest sister, Zoe, or Zo as she is usually designated, who is also the most likeable and realistic character in the story. Whilst vivisection is treated seriously throughout, humans are consistently undermined—Benjulia is *too* sinister, Ovid *too* noble, Carmina *too* helpless to be wholly plausible. Zoe, whom Robert Ashley regards as 'a delightful personality,' and Catherine Peters as 'one of the best child-portraits in Wilkie's work,'<sup>32</sup> manages to make novelistic excess appear as realistic exuberance.

Collins's portrayal of Zo reveals quite blatantly that he sees her as much more an animal than a little girl or any sort of human being. Her responses to the adults around her are those of a cute and playful kitten: she 'took her father's hand [...] and rubbed her head against it like a cat' (*HS*, Ch. V), an action which Mr Gallilee attributes to an itching head, rather than to his daughter's animalistic propensities; and more strikingly, she does not judge Benjulia from any moral standpoint, but likes him because he teases and tickles her. More significant still is her name, which, in its complete form, means 'life' (from the Greek *zōē*), and situates her in direct opposition

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31 Interestingly, in the 1948 film version of *The Woman in White*, the director, Peter Godfrey, viewed the relationships from a more modern standpoint, and felt that Collins's original design could be much improved upon by having Hartright marry Marian and ultimately casting the simple-minded Laura as their 'ward'. Whether he did this because he realized that his target audience—presumably consisting in the main of twentieth-century, middle-class Americans—would find Collins's ending unpalatable, or simply because he himself missed the point, must remain open to conjecture. By the same token, it seems probable that, in Godfrey's hands, *Heart and Science* would end with Ovid adopting Carmina and marrying Miss Minerva.

32 Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 116; Peters, p. 399.

to the murderous propensities of Mrs Gallilee and Benjulia, whilst in its <sup>name</sup> [diminutive] <sup>pet-nam</sup> form, Zo <sup>cf</sup> (~~from~~ *zōion*, meaning 'animal'), it is the etymological root of words for all animals, and thus presents its owner as a much more fundamental life form. It is she, with her primitive form of letter-writing—'dear ov you come back car is ill she wants you be quick don't say i writ this miss min gone i hate books i like you zo' (HS, Ch. XLVI)—who is able to recall Ovid to the scene, and thus set in motion the final events of the novel. Not only does she succeed in saving Carmina's life; she also brings about Benjulia's downfall, an event which leads to the freeing of his laboratory animals, thus confirming Zoe as their supreme champion.

Curious, too, is the way in which Zoe, rather than Carmina, as the *British Quarterly Review* mistakenly believed, 'converts nearly everything and everybody to show their best sides,'<sup>33</sup> although in some cases, these 'best' sides have sinister overtones. The reaction provoked in Dr Benjulia by Zo's animalistic qualities is a surprising one, as this short scene illustrates:

Zo ran away with his bamboo stick. After a passing look of gloomy indifference at the duenna, he called to the child to come back.

She obeyed him in an oddly indirect way, as if she had been returning against her will. At the same time she looked up in his face, with an absence of shyness which showed, like the snatching away of his stick, that she was familiarly acquainted with him, and accustomed to take liberties. And yet there was an expression of uneasy expectation in her round attentive eyes [...]

'Come here, child. Shall I tickle you?'

'I knew you'd say that,' Zo answered.

When men in general thoroughly enjoy the pleasure of talking nonsense to children, they can no more help smiling than they can help breathing. The doctor was an extraordinary exception to this rule; his grim face never relaxed—not even when Zo reminded him that one of his favourite recreations was tickling her. She obeyed, however, with the curious appearance of reluctant submission showing itself once more. He put two of his soft big finger-tips on her spine, just below the back of her neck, and pressed on the place. Zo started and wriggled under his touch. He observed her with as serious an interest as if he had been conducting a medical experiment. 'That's how you make our dog

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33 Unsigned review, 'Novels of the Quarter' (quoted more fully above).

kick with his leg,' said Zo, recalling her experience of the doctor in the society of the dog.[...] 'Do you think the dog likes it?'

'Never mind the dog. Do *you* like it?'

'I don't know.' (HS, Ch. XII)<sup>34</sup>

That he views her in the same light as he views his laboratory animals is self-evident, and we might almost think that his interest in her goes no further than this. However, the fact that, as well as his pre-suicide lament that "'I should have liked to tickle her once more'" (HS, Ch. XLII), he leaves all his fortune to her in his will, would seem to suggest that she, unlike Carmina, has come to mean something more to him than simply a subject for research. Possibly Collins intended us to infer from this that Benjulia possessed a kinder, more humane side than that which we have so far observed; however, modern scholarship inclines to a more Freudian interpretation of these details.<sup>35</sup> According to Coral Lansbury, for example, the relationship between Benjulia and Zoe is a covertly sexual one, as 'tickling, in the language of pornography, is a synonym for flogging or sexual intercourse, and we have met the stick before in all its manifestations of whip and male organ.'<sup>36</sup> Certainly Benjulia's enjoyment of the activity has sadistic, scopophilic connotations; Zo's reactions, however, cannot be so easily classified: her resignation to what is about to happen to her conforms to that of a trained animal, who knows that it must obey a command, whilst her ambivalent response to the experience seems suggestive of some form of forbidden pleasure.

In stark contrast to Zoe is her older sister, Maria:

One of the successful new products of the age we live in—the conventionally-charming child (who had never been smacked); possessed of the large round

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34 Again, we detect the influence of Darwin's *Expression*:

Dogs scratch themselves by a rapid movement of one of their hind-feet; and when their backs are rubbed with a stick, so strong is the habit, that they cannot help rapidly scratching the air or the ground in a useless and ludicrous manner (p. 45).

35 See Sigmund Freud, 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes', 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', and 'Three Essays on Sexuality: II Infantile Sexuality' in *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis: The Definitive Collection of Sigmund Freud's Writing*, ed. by Anna Freud (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 204-07, 243, and 323-43, respectively.

36 Coral Lansbury, *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection in Edwardian England* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 140.

eyes that we see in pictures, and the sweet manners and perfect principles that we read of in books. She called everybody 'dear'; she knew to a nicety how much oxygen she wanted in the composition of her native air; and—alas, poor wretch!—she had never wetted her shoes or dirtied her face since the day when she was born. (HS, Ch. V)

Even at this pre-pubescent stage in her development, Maria is very clearly a member of the human grouping. Her knowledge, having been almost artificially removed from all things animalistic, is, for that of a child, prodigious, and she is able to look down on her more primitive companions from the lofty heights of her sophistication. In response to the unreformed Miss Minerva's boast that "'Her [Maria's] studies in natural history have made her well acquainted with the habits of monkeys,'" she is quite prepared to deliver a lecture on the differences between apes and monkeys, and why "'intelligent curiosity leads us to study the habits of animals that are new to us.'" (HS, Ch. XIV). Clearly, Collins is indulging in a certain irony when he has the outraged Teresa, herself a member of the lower order of species, exclaim:

'You're an animal that's new to me [...] I never in all my life met with such a child as this. If you please, madam governess, put this girl in a cage. My intelligent curiosity wants to study a monkey that's new to me.' (HS, Ch. XIV)

The closest the novel has to a villainess is another over-sophisticated, non-animalistic character, the self-centred and heartless Mrs Gallilee, described by Robert Ashley as 'Collins's most credible, though not his most striking, Jezebel.'<sup>37</sup> Mrs Gallilee, a product of, as it were, over-evolution, embodies the negative qualities of scientific women as perceived by much of Victorian society.<sup>38</sup> Whether or not Collins shared the view that such interests were inappropriate for women is not clear, although it is evident that, to paraphrase Voltaire, he might have disagreed with what such women

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<sup>37</sup> Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, pp. 116-17

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), for further illustration of the hostility faced by women with an interest in matters scientific. Chapter 5, in which Beer discusses the criticism received by George Eliot for the persistent scientific allusions in her novels, is particularly significant.

thought, but would have defended till death their right to think it. As Carol Dyhouse explains,

Women were expected to occupy themselves in providing an environment— a context in which *men* could live and work. [...] Women of all social groups were encouraged from childhood to consider it selfish to become wrapped up in their own interests, for the ideal was to serve others, and always to consider the interests of their menfolk first.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, at a time when self-sacrificing femininity and other-directed domesticity were paramount, Mrs Maria Gallilee provides a cautionary tale of what happens when knowledge for its own sake is allowed to replace the normal, and theoretically natural, emotions of a wife and mother. Collins wishes his readers to realize that his character has not always been the virago with whom we have become acquainted. Indeed, in her youth, she, too, was a typical Victorian ‘good girl’, and she appears to have, in many ways, resembled the niece whom she now despises. Like Carmina, she clearly demonstrated a considerable number of what G. Stanley Hall, the author of a substantial work on the ‘biological psychology’ of the young, identified as the concomitant foibles of adolescence: ‘clothes-consciousness, whimsicality, unconscious flirtatiousness, fads, fickleness, weepiness, giggling, coquetry, passion for secrecy and, above all, [a] strong distaste for study.’<sup>40</sup> Upon discovering an old portrait of herself:

[...] a faintly contemptuous smile parted her hard lips, provoked by the recollection of her youth.

What a fool she had been, at that early period of her life! In those days, she had trembled with pleasure at the singing of a famous Italian tenor; she had flown into a passion when a new dress proved to be a misfit, on the evening of a ball; she had given money to beggars in the street; she had fallen in love with a poor young man, and had terrified her weak-minded hysterical mother, by threatening to commit suicide when the beloved object was forbidden the house. (*HS*, Ch. LIV)

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<sup>39</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948), p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology, and its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (New York: Appleton, 1904), discussed in Dyhouse, pp. 122-23.

Having made a poorer marriage than her younger sister, Susan, she has turned into—indeed, has turned herself into—a scientific monster:

From the horrid day when Susan became Lady Northlake, Maria became a serious woman. All her earthly interests centred now in the cultivation of her intellect. She started on that glorious career, which associated her with the march of science. In only a year afterward—as an example of the progress which a resolute woman can make—she was familiar with zoophyte fossils, and had succeeded in dissecting the nervous system of a bee. (*HS*, Ch. VII)

No longer is she able to respond to those around her with any form of human warmth. When love causes Ovid to begin to behave strangely, Mrs Gallilee is mystified.

If she had not deliberately starved her imagination, and emptied her heart of any tenderness of feeling which it might once have possessed, her son's odd behaviour would have interested instead of perplexing her. As it was, her scientific education left her as completely in the dark, where questions of sentiment were concerned, as if her experience of humanity, in its relation to love, had been experience in the cannibal islands. (*HS*, Ch. VI)

In Mrs Gallilee, then, Collins appears to be adhering closely to the dominant views on woman's incompatibility with all things scientific or academic, which Hall regarded as a substitute for maternal fulfilment. Women who placed intellectual pursuits above marriage and motherhood were 'the apotheosis of selfishness from the standpoint of every biological ethics.'<sup>41</sup> Whilst Mrs Gallilee has had two husbands, and given birth to three children, her interest in them, from a conjugal or maternal point of view, is limited in the extreme. One of the most humorous passages in the novel is provided by Mrs Gallilee's horror at her timid husband's attempts to pluck up sufficient courage to tackle his formidable wife on the subject of her excessive expenditure. After complimenting her health, her taste, and her health once more, he 'leered at his learned wife, and patted her shoulder!'

For the moment, Mrs Gallilee was petrified. At his time of life, was this fat and feeble creature approaching her with conjugal endearments? At that early hour of the day, had his guilty lips tasted his favourite champagne, foaming in

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41 Dyhouse, p. 124.



his well-beloved silver mug, over his much-admired lump of ice? And was *this* the result? (*HS*, Ch. XXIX)

Despite having a seemingly admirable mother himself, Collins never shirks from revealing the flaws inherent in the belief that motherhood could be equated with sanctity. As a mother, Mrs Gallilee is little more than a joke: she prefers to disregard her maternal duties wherever possible, although she can hardly be blamed for not welcoming an uneducated and unworldly adolescent niece into her household.

Not only has Mrs Gallilee sacrificed heart to science, she is also about to lose her reason to it as well. Whilst it is the discovery that she has been deserted by her husband, her children, and her maid, which acts as the catalyst, Collins evidently wishes his readers to understand that these events are not the sole cause of her mental decline. A somewhat superficial interpretation would attribute her cerebral deterioration partly to her excessive interest in science and partly to her excessive lack of interest in humanity. Whilst there may be some truth in this, Collins's critique of his society goes much further, and it would be naïve to assume that he is merely upholding the dominant patriarchal view that 'excessive use of the brain does not just confuse woman, it makes her ill.'<sup>42</sup> He is too clear-sighted to accept such a generalization, and, whilst he might, in sending Ovid abroad, be seen to acknowledge the hazards of immoderate cerebral activity, he certainly feels no obligation to limit these perils exclusively to women. It would, therefore, be facile to conclude that Collins wishes us to believe that Mrs Gallilee has simply abandoned nature and femininity for culture and

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42 Professor Paul Möbius, 'On the Physiological Debility of Women', (1898); quoted in Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 172. This view was also held by Dr Henry Maudsley who, in an article entitled 'Sex in Mind and in Education' (*Fortnightly Review*, n. s. 15 (1874), 466-83), observed:

It is needful to consider whether [woman can be educated] without serious injury to her health and strength. It is not enough to point to exceptional instance of women who have undergone such a training, and have proved their capacities when tried by the same standard as men; without doubt there are women who can, and will, so distinguish themselves if stimulus be applied and opportunity given; the question is, whether they may not do it at a cost which is too large a demand upon the resources of their nature. Is it well to let them contend on equal terms with men for the goal of man's ambition? (p. 469).

infirmity. For him, clearly, there can be no pat definition of the naturally feminine, a view shared by John Stuart Mill, who in *The Subjection of Women* argues that women:

[...] have always hitherto been kept, as far as regards spontaneous development, in so unnatural a state, that their nature cannot but have been greatly distorted and disguised; and no one can safely pronounce that if women's nature was left to choose its direction as freely as men's, and if no artificial bent were attempted to be given to it except that required by the conditions of human society, and given to both sexes alike, there would be any material difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in the character and capacities which would unfold themselves.<sup>43</sup>

Aware, no doubt, that this interpretation would escape the majority of his readers who would, instead, assume that, for once, he had been perfectly conformist in attitude, Collins cannot resist thumbing his nose at convention. The novel ostensibly ends with the type of closure that was required by the Victorian reading public: the good characters are rewarded, the bad ones punished. The final paragraphs of the novel are devoted to Mrs Gallilee, whom we see brought low by her intellectual excesses and heartless cupidity. She has forfeited the love and respect of her husband and children, and lives on charitable handouts from her son. As Dennis points out, 'few things were as sacred to the Victorian reading mass as domestic happiness,'<sup>44</sup> and this is now irredeemably lost to her. She has—surely—become an object of pity to all who behold her. What self-righteous, condemnatory Victorian reader could possibly object to such a paradigmatic representation of a dangerously subversive female, and her consequent containment? However, Collins's treatment of Mrs Gallilee is double-edged: she may have lost all those things generally regarded as essential to the happiness of a middle-class, middle-aged woman, but Mrs Gallilee—like Wilkie Collins himself—has never conformed to the ideologies accepted by others of her class and age. It is no accident that the final words of the novel are spoken by Mrs Gallilee. Gone is the piteous and pitiful creature, who only eight chapters previously dropped to her knees, begging that someone should pray for her as she does not know how to pray for herself; instead we

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<sup>43</sup> Mill, p. 173.

<sup>44</sup> Dennis, p. 454.

see the newest incarnation of Mrs Gallilee, the blue-stockings, the woman 'At Home to Science', and we learn from her own lips that, despite all that has gone before, 'At last, I'm a happy woman!' (*HS*, Ch. LXIII).

Perhaps influenced by the experiences of his female companions, Martha Rudd and Caroline Graves, Collins would, in this novel, seem to be warning his reader against assuming a prescriptive attitude towards fulfilment and happiness. *Heart and Science*, with, what is for a Victorian novel, its atypical perspective on these issues, is interesting in that it neither elevates nor condemns those women who find their contentment in marital domesticity and housekeeping, or in education and science. Moreover, the novel offers a curious inversion of the corrupted maxim of *Animal Farm*, 'Four legs good, two legs better.' As I stated earlier, in *Heart and Science*, the role of heroine is shared by Carmina, Teresa, Miss Minerva, and Zoe. This somewhat hazy distinction is, however, not all that they have in common: what unites them perhaps most strongly is the fact that they are presented as occupying a position in life much closer to that of animals, of those despised sub-human creatures so often the victims of man's whim, than to that of sophisticated, cultured human beings. Whilst modern readers may find some, if not all, of these individuals infuriating and unattractive, Collins could have been in no doubt that his Victorian readers would not only have found them charming, but also have been able to identify with them. In the other dominant characters—Benjulia, representative of human advancement, Mrs Gallilee, so modern that her contemporaries regard her with suspicion and distaste, and Maria, a paragon of artifice and forced maturity—these same readers would have found little to appeal either to their sense of propriety or to their secret desires. These 'bad' characters, then, may be dehumanized inasmuch as they lack the compassion and empathy which should separate man from other animals, but that dehumanization clearly does not equate with animalization; for in Collins's world, where post-Darwinian evolutionary theory is turned on its head, animals, with their natural, uncorrupted emotional and instinctual responses, are undeniably superior to their human counterparts. The animal imagery used by Collins in *Heart and Science* provides the novel with a clear focus, which has, unfortunately, been ignored by both contemporary

and modern critics, who have chosen instead to concentrate on the more superficial aspects of the story, and to evaluate it according to their own sympathies with Collins's treatment of vivisection.



In *The Two Destinies*, Collins also warns against assuming a prescriptive attitude, this time towards those individuals who do not conform to society's stereotyping, and proclaims, as Charlotte Brontë did in the Preface to *Jane Eyre*, that 'conventionality is not morality.' *The Two Destinies* tells the story of George Germaine's undying love for his childhood sweetheart, Mary Dermody, from whom he is separated for over ten years. In the course of the novel, George is parted from Mary, becomes impoverished, changes his name, inherits a fortune, finds himself obsessed with a mysterious suicidal stranger (who the reader realizes from the start is little Mary grown to adulthood, even though George remains ignorant of this fact until the penultimate chapter of the novel), learns she is married to a bigamist and has an illegitimate child, starts having dreams and visions of her, flees to Scotland to forget her, finds himself involved with a mysterious veiled stranger, has more visions, returns to England, contemplates suicide, attempts to murder the woman he wishes to marry, realizes that she is none other than the girl he loved many years ago, persuades her to become his wife, and lives as happily ever after as the husband of a social pariah is allowed.<sup>45</sup>

Whilst Collins uses many of his favourite techniques and leitmotifs in *The Two Destinies*—multiple narrators, bizarre marital situations, a double heroine, a weak hero, a quest for identity, beauty disfigured, suicide, illegitimacy—he also ventures into new territory, using the supernatural as the main focus of his story, providing his readers

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<sup>45</sup> This is, of course, a vastly different courtship from that enjoyed by the similarly named George and Mary Germain in Anthony Trollope's *Is He Popenjoy?*, also published in 1878. The two novels have little in common—other than that the two Georges are of more aristocratic descent than their Marys—as Trollope concentrates upon much more respectable individuals, and the matrimonial troubles of his Germaines are slight compared with Collins's.

with more information than that available to his characters, experimenting with dramatic irony, and making his protagonist a man.<sup>46</sup> It is from the perspective of this male protagonist, George Germaine, that the majority of the novel is told, although the first chapter is narrated by an American dinner guest, the last by Mary in epistolary form, and there is a middle section which represents an excerpt from George's mother's diary. Indeed, so much is this George's story that, when—like a great many of Collins's heroes who feel the need to leave the scene of the main action for the good of their mental or physical well-being—George goes off to the Highlands of Scotland, so does the narrative.

Although this thesis aims to establish the literary validity of Collins's later novels, there can be little doubt that *The Two Destinies* does little to add to his reputation. Neither the bizarre—albeit accurately described—scenery of the Shetlands and the remote parts of Holland nor the mechanical reliance on supernatural writing and ghostly visions make up for the lack of suspense in the novel, since we know from the 'Prelude' that George and Mary will marry, but that their happiness will be tainted because George's friends—with the exception of the two Americans—cannot bring their wives to visit his wife.<sup>47</sup> Whilst there may be parallels with the experiences of Collins's own mistresses, and with those of George Eliot who suffered similarly even at the hands of her own family when she chose to live with the already married George Henry Lewes, it is important to remember that, unlike them, Mary is legally married to the

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46 Nicola Justine Louise Shutt complains that '*The Two Destinies*—misdirected, unrealistic, and unsuccessful—was a one-off experiment,' and is thankful that 'Collins never tried this trick again.' ('Nobody's Child: The Theme of Illegitimacy in the Novels of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Wilkie Collins' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 1990), p. 229).

47 This exception is telling in itself. Whilst the couple in question are clearly respected members of society, the fact that they are American would, to contemporary readers, automatically have suggested a lowering of standards. Commenting on the observation made by the American travel writer, Charles Stewart, that 'the usages of polished life, are in both nations the same, but where there is one individual or one family in the United States, trained and habituated to the highest refinement of manners, there are in England a hundred,' Christopher Mulvey adds that this 'imbalance of the numbers evidently obliged the most refined members of American society to mix with those beneath them if they were to have any society whatever of which to be a member' (Charles Stewart, *Sketches of Society in Great Britain and Ireland* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard, 1835), p. 68; Christopher Mulvey, *Transatlantic Manners: Social Patterns in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Travel Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 127).

man she calls her husband. Indeed, the interest of the story lies in the fact that, although morally blameless, Mary is condemned by society. As I shall show in the next chapter, Collins faced much hostility when he appeared to expect society to embrace to its bosom the reformed prostitute-heroines of *The New Magdalen* and *The Fallen Leaves*; in *The Two Destinies* he shows that the same prejudices can be directed towards those much less culpable. Moreover, Mary herself seems to subscribe to society's injustice when she decrees marriage to George to be an impossibility. "I prize your honour beyond my happiness. If I marry you, your career is destroyed by your wife" (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. XXXIII), she protests, a comment which Collins no doubt intended ironically, for he has already told the reader that George has led a quite determinedly sordid life, and has already done more than enough to cause irreparable damage, if not to his honour and career, to his mental and physical well-being. What is, perhaps, most shocking today, however, is the fact that, when the novel was written, George's intentional excesses would have been overlooked, whereas Mary's accidental ones were regarded with repugnance.

George is a typically weak Collinsian male who allows himself to be dominated by his female counterparts. 'Go where I may,' he complains at one stage in the novel, 'the disturbing influence of women seems to be the only influence I am fated to feel.'<sup>48</sup> Nor is George a particularly likeable hero in other respects: as a child, he refuses to submit to the authority of his uncle; as a youth, he neglects his studies and devotes himself to 'reckless profligacy [...] in the company of women who had reached the lowest depths of degradation' (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. I); and as an adult, he tries to murder the woman he loves. This, then, is the man from whose point of view we are to consider the story, and through whose eyes Collins again presents us with a split heroine, dividing the role superficially between Mary Dermody and Miss Dunross, and more significantly, between the different personæ represented by Mary.

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48 Wilkie Collins, *The Two Destinies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1876; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1995), *The Story*, Ch. XIX.

The first of these personæ is George's childhood sweetheart, Mary Dermody, the bailiff's daughter, 'a fragile child, with mild grey eyes and a pale complexion; singularly shy and silent' (*TD*, *The Prelude*, Ch. II). The friendship between the two children is viewed with fond indulgence by the bailiff, but regarded, by his employer, George's father, as endangering the structure of the social hierarchy. He blames Mary's father for encouraging the liaison for his own benefit, and dismisses him without waiting to find out the truth. Mary Dermody, then, like her father, is the passive victim of a middle-class society's preconceptions.<sup>49</sup>

Mary's next incarnation occurs some ten years later as the 'wife' of a Dutch businessman, Ernest Van Brandt. In a story closely paralleling that of the marriage between Bernard Winterfield and the drunken Emma in *The Black Robe*, Van Brandt was 'entrapped into a private marriage with a profligate woman, when he was little more than a lad' (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. VIII). Like Winterfield at the time of his subsequent 'marriage' to Stella Eyrecourt, Van Brandt 'marries' Mary believing his first wife to be dead. In both novels, the bigamous nature of the second liaison is only revealed when the first, and legitimate, wife appears, alive and well and brandishing her marriage lines to prove her status. The difference between the two stories is that in *The Black Robe*, the first wife presents herself as the couple leave the church, thus preventing the consummation of the marriage and Stella's 'fall'. In *The Two Destinies*, however, the first Mrs Van Brandt pays a visit to Mary after she and Van Brandt have not only lived as man and wife for some considerable time, but also have a child together. It is the discovery of the first Mrs Van Brandt's continuing existence which prompts Mary to throw herself into the river, from whence she is rescued by George. Despite her moral compunctions, Mary, for the sake of her child, returns to live 'a degraded life' (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. IX) with Van Brandt, but because of these same moral compunctions, refuses

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<sup>49</sup> Dougal B. MacEachen argues that, despite his pleas for equality between the classes, both in *The Two Destinies* and in *Man and Wife*, Collins was still 'an unconscious snob', showing little or no interest in the working classes, and frequently providing his working class protagonists with middle-class forebears ('Wilkie Collins: Victorian Crusader' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1948), pp. 32-33). This tendency was, of course, common in Victorian novels, and it is, I suggest, more significant that in *The Fallen Leaves* and *The Evil Genius* Collins goes some way towards reversing it.

to marry George 'for my food and shelter [or] because there is no lawful tie that binds me to the father of my child' (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. XXIV).<sup>50</sup> Mary Van Brandt has ceased to be a victim of her class, and has become a victim of her sex: unable to fend for herself—despite her working class upbringing, she is ill-equipped to deal with the demands of independence, and almost starves to death when she tries to do so—she is dependent on the bounty of first Van Brandt and then George.

The third form Mary assumes is that of George's wife. Having apparently forgiven him for professing his love, proposing marriage, and then attempting to murder her whilst under the impression that she just happened to have the same Christian name as his childhood love, Mary has settled into her new role with ease, causing the American gentleman to remark that 'it was so plain (and so pleasant) to see here at least was a happy marriage! Here were two people who had all their dearest hopes, wishes and sympathies in common' (*TD*, *The Prelude*, Ch. I). Curiously, despite her lowly start in life, and the hardships she subsequently endured, there is nothing in Mary's manner or behaviour to hint that she is anything less than a lady born and bred: George's father's fears were evidently without foundation.

Not only does Mary appear in these three guises; in addition all of these personifications of her are themselves dyadic. Mary Dermody lives on as an idealized adult in George's imagination: asked by the curious Miss Dunross what kind of a woman he would now expect his little Mary to be, George 'drew the picture of a frail and delicate woman—the most absolute contrast imaginable to Mrs Van Brandt!' (*TD*,

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<sup>50</sup> Collins also employs the profligate wife/hapless young husband motif in *No Name* as a means of making Magdalen and Norah Vanstone illegitimate. Andrew Vanstone, having been ensnared in the traditional Collinsian manner, varies from his successors, however, in that when he falls in love with a good and honourable woman, 'his frankness and his sense of honour forbade him to deceive her: he opened his heart and told her the truth' (*NN*, *The First Scene*, Ch. XIII). Her reaction is very different from that of Mary or Stella: 'having once resolved to sacrifice her life to the man she loved; having quieted her conscience by persuading herself that his marriage was a legal mockery, and that she was "his wife in the sight of Heaven;" she set herself from the first to accomplish the one foremost purpose of so living with him, in the world's eye, as never to raise the suspicion that she was not his lawful wife' (*ibid.*). When the first wife dies, Vanstone marries the woman who has lived as his spouse for so many years. This is, however, not enough to legitimize his two daughters who were born before this union took place.



The Story, Ch. XVI).<sup>51</sup> Mary Van Brandt appears both as human flesh and blood, and as an apparition lacking in real substance. Mary Germaine is at once the devoted and loving wife, and the “cast off mistress of Van Brandt,” who had persuaded Mr Germaine into disgracing himself by marrying her and becoming the father of her child’ (TD, The Finale).

Throughout the novel Mary is very rarely seen as a real woman, capable of thoughts and feelings of her own. This is, perhaps, no accident. Mary is, apart from in the final chapter of the novel, always seen from the perspective of others, and her true self is inevitably obscured by the prejudices of these characters. George’s father misconstrues Mary’s affection for his son, because he expects the working classes to use underhand methods to better themselves; George himself fails to recognize Mary because his expectations of her are so different from reality; the wives of his friends refuse even to meet her because of the conduct they feel is expected of them by the rest of society.

This novel, like *Man and Wife*, discussed below, also revolves around the quest for identity. In *Man and Wife*, it is the protagonist herself who must unravel the mystery surrounding her own identity, whereas, in *The Two Destinies*, it is George who must ascertain the identity of the woman who so obsesses him before he, or she, can finally achieve the happiness Collins wishes us to believe is their ‘destiny’.<sup>52</sup>

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51 George’s inability to link his childhood sweetheart with the adult Mary in many ways recalls the psychological reluctance of Pip in *Great Expectations* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1861) to acknowledge the resemblance between the refined and haughty Estella and Molly, Jaggers’s housekeeper, who is far beneath her socially. As H. M. Daleski points out, this use of the uncanny in Dickens’s novel ‘is a means of disclosure, functioning to hint at what is hidden and only later fully revealed;’ in *The Two Destinies*, unfortunately, what is hidden is already apparent to the reader, and George’s inability to make the connexion is, to the reader, a source of frustration rather than one of suspense. (See H. M. Daleski, ‘Dickens and the Proleptic Uncanny’, *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*, ed. by Michael Timko, Fred Kaplan, and Edward Guiliano, vol. 13, (New York: AMS Press, 1984), pp. 193-206 (p. 195)).

52 It is, perhaps, significant that, although George eventually learns that Mary Van Brandt was, previously, Mary Dermody, his own identity is never fully disclosed: we are told that he assumed the name of his step-father; we are not told the name by which Mary first knew him.

The other heroine of the novel, Miss Dunross, is at once one of Collins's most enigmatic and most pointless creations. After George is injured, he is taken to the remote Shetland island home of Mr Dunross and his daughter, who, we are told, 'are worshipped [by the poor inhabitants of the district] as semi-divine beings. Their names come after the Sacred Name, in the prayers which the parents teach to the children' (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. XIII). After nursing these villagers through an epidemic of some unmentioned disease, Miss Dunross herself fell ill, and 'is now an incurable sufferer from some mysterious nervous disorder which nobody understands, and which has kept her a prisoner on the island, self-withdrawn from all human observation for years past' (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. XIII). Indeed, Miss Dunross has withdrawn herself from human observation to such an extent that she is never to be seen without a thick veil obscuring her face from view.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, given the quasi-religious imagery which Collins has used to describe her thus far, some parallel between her veiling and that of noviciates can be inferred; however, she informs George that the purpose of her veil is to shelter her from the light to which she is uncomfortably sensitive.<sup>54</sup> When subtlety gives way to curiosity, George is reprimanded:

'You have been trying to see me,' she [Miss Dunross] said. [...] 'If we are to be friends [...] we must begin by understanding one another. Don't associate any romantic ideas of invisible beauty with *me*, Mr Germaine. I had but one beauty to boast of before I fell ill—my complexion—and that has gone for ever. There is nothing to see in me now, but the ruin of what was once a woman.' (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. XV)

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53 For modern critical discussions of veiling, see Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. by Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 47-63, Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 469-77; and Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), pp. 144-68.

54 Catherine Peters notes that Collins wrote *The Two Destinies* at a time when he was tormented by gout in both eyes, a condition which not only severely curtailed his social activities, but also no doubt caused him to suffer unpleasantly in bright light (pp. 380-381). It would appear that this disability, whilst enabling him to portray Miss Dunross's isolation and affliction with verisimilitude, also made him less thorough than usual in his research. Although fond of animals—he attacked vivisection in *Heart and Science* and made a small dog the true hero of *My Lady's Money*—Collins seems to have known very little about the temperament and weight of cats. That Miss Dunross has trained six such self-willed animals to dance rhythmically to the music of her harp is more than a little implausible, but that she, who is throughout depicted as frail to the point of invalidism, should be strong enough, and substantial enough, to support the combined weight of one cat on her head plus two more on each shoulder (the sixth perches on the harp), completely defies credibility (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. XV).

Once again, Collins provides his readers—and, indeed, his protagonist—with a further quest for identity. What is Miss Dunross really like? What is hidden under her veil? We are reminded, as Collins no doubt intended that we should be, of the veiled secrets of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and other gothic tales. It is only later in the story, long after it has become clear that Miss Dunross has fallen in love with George, and doubts are beginning to arise as to the degree of fidelity George feels towards Mary, that Collins reveals to us that Miss Dunross's true motive in wearing the veil is to hide some disfigurement so hideous as to be indescribable, a necessary stratagem in order to remove Miss Dunross from the position of rival for George's affections. The veil now takes on connotations of a bridal head-dress, with a bride even more grotesque than Dickens's Miss Havisham to wear it.

Miss Dunross's veil is not the only device Collins employs to obfuscate his second heroine's identity. As well as depriving her of a face, he also deprives her of a first name. She is, from her first appearance in the novel to her eventual death, every bit as remote and isolated as the island upon which she lives.

I referred, in the Introduction, to the way in which Collins, in his later fiction, abandoned his previous fondness for dramatic revelation. The disclosure of Miss Dunross's ruined face is an excellent example of this change in narrative focus. The discovery is conveyed with understatement: neither the reader nor George is allowed to witness the secret the veil has concealed, but has to content himself with what the doctor (who cares for Miss Dunross during her final illness) is prepared to divulge in a letter:

It is true that she suffered under a morbid sensitiveness to the action of light. It is also true that this was not the only result, or the worst result, of the malady that afflicted her. She *had* another reason for keeping her face hidden—a reason known to two persons only: to the doctor who lives in the village near her father's house, and to myself. We are both pledged never to divulge what our eyes alone have seen. We have kept our terrible secret, even from her father, and we shall carry it with us to our graves. (*TD*, *The Story*, Ch. XXVII)

Even now, we do not know the truth. We are not, however, notably disappointed by this lack of knowledge. Miss Dunross's frequent admonitions to George to relinquish any

fond hopes he may be nurturing that her beauty may not, after all, be irrecoverable have convinced us, if not him, that she is right. Moreover, the Prelude to the story, in which we find George and Mary already married, has removed the possibility of George's union with another woman: Miss Dunross cannot, therefore, be expected to follow in the footsteps of Esther Summerson, and make a sudden and potentially implausible recovery.

The 'faceless' woman is not new to Collins, although his use of her, in *The Two Destinies*, is. When he introduces us to Lydia Gwilt, the arch-villainess of *Armada*, he describes her as a malevolent twelve-year old forger; when she later reappears as governess to the innocent heroine she is veiled, sinister, nameless, and unquestionably means ill to the characters we have come to love. Whilst there are epistolary references to her 'beauty', there are others to the cosmetic enhancement of this; and the one man who may have had the opportunity to catch a glimpse of what the veil conceals dies before he has chance to communicate his observations to anyone. As we read on, we learn the name that she has chosen for herself, but still we are not told what the veil conceals. The suspense increases: just what *will* we see? Do we expect disfigurement—has Collins decided to punish her for past excesses in a similar manner to that used by Mrs Henry Wood in *East Lynne*? Or is the opposite what awaits us? Eventually our patience is rewarded, and we are permitted to share with the eponymous hero the moment of revelation:

As he came within sight of her face, he stopped short in ungovernable astonishment. The sudden revelation of her beauty, as she smiled and looked at him, inquiringly, suspended the movement in his limbs and the words on his lips. A vague doubt beset him whether it was the governess, after all.

He roused himself; and advancing a few paces, mentioned his name. 'May I ask,' he added, 'if I have the pleasure—?'

The lady met him easily and gracefully half way.

'Major Milroy's governess,' she said. 'Miss Gwilt.' (A, The Story, Bk. 2, Ch.

IX)

Lydia enjoys all those attributes which Miss Dunross not only lacks now, but also never possessed. We may, once, have concurred with a contemporary reviewer's description of Lydia as 'fouler than the refuse of the streets,'<sup>55</sup> but, from the moment he reveals her stupefying beauty, Collins is soon able to persuade us completely to disregard such trivialities as decency and morality. By the time his anti-heroine begins to put into action her evil schemes, we, like the elderly Mr Bashwood, are completely in her power, and long for the success of her intentions just as a hundred pages earlier we had longed for their failure.

Miss Dunross's unveiling is not, however, completely pointless, as it prefigures the dropping of the scales from George's eyes as he realizes, as the reader has long realized, that Mary Van Brandt is, in fact, Mary Dermody. More significantly, it serves to establish a form of reduplication between her and Mary. As I have already shown, Mary, despite her innocence, is obliged, by the demands of societal prejudices, to hide herself away from her husband's friends, the very people from whom she might have hoped to find support and friendship. By the same token, Miss Dunross's disfigurement—most probably, although this is never stated, a result of small-pox—causes her to withdraw herself from the world. To those middle-class Victorians, who suffered from what Ronald Pearsall terms 'syphilophobia', there could have been only one possible explanation.<sup>56</sup> Whilst Collins goes to great lengths to emphasize her spiritual and bodily purity, the fact of her seclusion would seem to imply some kind of disgrace or shame. The poor villagers may choose to deify her, but those of her own social class, we may believe, would prefer to revile her. Thus, Collins challenges complacent perceptions of what is morally right and wrong. Just as Mary is being punished by society for attempting to protect her child from harm, so is Miss Dunross being punished for attempting to protect her neighbours from disease. Only those who put their own interests first are allowed to prosper and to prescribe. *The Two Destinies*, as I

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55 Unsigned review, *Spectator* 39 (1866), 638-40; quoted in Page, p. 150.

56 Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), p. 226.

have already mentioned, is a far from perfect novel. Nevertheless, Collins's challenging of the dominant code is both bold and insightful, and may perhaps be considered as some compensation for the faulty way in which his dissension is expressed.

### III

The themes of illegitimacy, matrimonial irregularities, and precarious identities are also present in *Man and Wife*, generally regarded as the first of Collins's 'thesis novels', because of its unmitigated attacks on athleticism and the marriage laws of Britain.<sup>57</sup> In some ways reminiscent of *Armadale* and *No Name*, and presaging *The Legacy of Cain*, *Man and Wife* is concerned with what Lyn Pykett calls 'the determining influence of the familial past,'<sup>58</sup> and raises questions about identity and heredity.

The story of *Man and Wife* deals with two generations of Anne Silvesters, both of whom find themselves victims of anomalous marriages. The first Anne Silvester, believes herself to have been Mrs John Vanborough for thirteen years, until, because of a legal technicality, she is informed that her marriage is null and void. This Anne Silvester dies soon afterwards, leaving a child, the second Anne Silvester, who, because of the same legal technicality, is now a bastard.

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<sup>57</sup> In spite of—or perhaps because of—his own extra-marital relationships, Collins had, by this time, long been preoccupied by the laws concerning marriage, and he had already attempted to show their injustice, in a less overt manner, in *The Woman in White*, *Armadale*, and *No Name*. Amongst the great trials of the nineteenth century which centred on irregularities in marriage law, and with which Collins must certainly have been familiar are those of Dalrymple vs. Dalrymple early in the century and of Longworth vs. Yelverton in the 1860s. For contemporary details of these, see 'The Laws of Marriage and Divorce', *Westminster Review*, 26 (1864), 442-69; 'The Marriage Law of the Three Kingdoms', *Cornhill*, 16 (1867), 432-39; and 'The Marriage Law of Scotland', *Fortnightly Review*, n. s. 2, (1867), 673-87; and for a more modern account, Duncan Crow, *Theresa: The Story of the Yelverton Case* (London: Panther, 1966). Collins also corresponded with Caroline Norton, whose own marital situation gave rise to the passing of the Infant Custody Act in 1839. For further details, see Teri Silvio, 'The Male Representing the Female Representing Herself: Wilkie Collins and Caroline Norton,' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, 1985), and Janet Murray, *Strong-Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 134-36.

<sup>58</sup> Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel: From 'The Woman in White' to 'The Moonstone'* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p. 29.

Not content with having made Anne the younger illegitimate by marital complications, Collins also ensnares her in a complicated plot revolving around legally valid marriages between the unwitting and legally invalid marriages between the consenting. Finding herself pregnant, Anne wishes to marry the father of her child, a boorish athlete called Geoffrey Delamayn. She thinks up a scheme whereby he can marry her privately, thus giving the child a name, but without encumbering himself with a wife who is only a governess.<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately, the plan goes awry, and Geoffrey is temporarily able to shirk his duty by claiming that Anne is, through another legal anomaly, already married to his best friend, Arnold Brinkworth. Arnold is engaged to Anne's best friend, Blanche, and before Anne is able to apprise him of their possible espousal, he and Blanche are married. Eventually, thanks to a carelessly worded note written by Geoffrey, Anne is proven to be his wife, not Arnold's. Despite appearances to the contrary, Geoffrey does not accept this state of affairs, as, by gaining a poor wife, he risks losing the chance of a prosperous marriage to a rich widow and a sizeable inheritance from his father. He determines to free himself of Anne, and blackmails his landlady, Hester Detheridge, into helping him murder her. Just as the crime is about to be committed, however, Hester strangles Geoffrey, allowing Anne to escape, and, somewhat improbably, marry an elderly Scottish barrister.

Collins introduces his first Anne Silvester by comparing her with her friend, Blanche, later to be the mother of a daughter of the same name. We are told that Blanche is 'passably attractive and passably intelligent,' whereas Anne is 'rarely beautiful, and rarely endowed.'<sup>60</sup> We soon learn, however, that for all her beauty and talent, Anne Silvester comes from an even more undesirable background than the working class respectability endured by Mary Dermody:

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59 Anne's situation was probably not so shocking to Collins's contemporaries as modern-day readers might be tempted to believe. Michael Mason, in *The Making of Victorian Sexuality: Sexual Behaviour and Its Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), observes that, at mid-century, a startlingly high proportion—somewhere between a third and a half—of all brides were pregnant on their wedding day (pp. 66-67), and Sally Mitchell notes that, at this time, one in thirteen women was likely to give birth out of wedlock (p. xiii).

60 Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife* (London: F. S. Ellis, 1870; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1990), Prologue, Part I.

Anne's parents were heartless and depraved. Their one idea, in connection with their daughter, was to speculate on her beauty, and to turn her abilities to profitable account. [...] Anne was to wait at home until the first opportunity offered of sending her cheaply to Milan. There, among strangers, she was to be perfected in the actress's and the singer's art—then to return to England, and make the fortune of her family on the lyric stage. (*MW*, Prologue, Pt. I)

To a modern reader, the labelling of Mr and Mrs Silvester as 'heartless' or 'depraved' merely for desiring a theatrical career for their daughter seems somewhat harsh, but from a Victorian reader's point of view, their ambition was tantamount to condemning their child to become a fallen woman. As Nina Auerbach points out, the phrase 'public woman' was used to refer to both actress and prostitute alike.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, following the hostile reviews received by *No Name*, in which the heroine, Magdalen Vanstone, has a talent for theatricals, which she later uses for deceit and personal gain, Collins was only too well aware of the reaction he would provoke by destining his protagonist for such a profession.

Anne Silvester Senior is, however, a very different actress from Magdalen, and indeed from the dominant perception of actresses in general. Auerbach, again, observes that:

Acting was one of the few professions whereby a woman could transcend her prescribed social function of self-negating service to live out her own myth: to an intelligent, passionate woman the stage offered authority and fame, wealth, glamour, [as well as] emotional and sexual freedom.<sup>62</sup>

Anne, however, is circumscribed by her role as the loving—and emotionally dependent—wife of the unfeeling man to whom she has the misfortune to believe herself to be married. Her parents, heartless and depraved though they might have been, intended Anne to live a life of *conscious* pretence as an actress; instead she has been obliged to live a life of *unconscious* pretence as John Vanborough's 'wife'. The apparent identity inherent within this role has subsumed any real identity which Anne may once have possessed.

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61 Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 205.

62 Auerbach, p. 205.



When she is eventually cast aside, her identity as Mrs Vanborough, fragile at best, is shattered. Far more of a 'lady' than Magdalen Vanstone, Anne is incapable of fighting for her identity either as a Silvester or as a Vanborough, and within a year she dies of a broken heart.

The idea of hereditary fate and deathbed predictions which Collins had already employed in *Armada*, are reworked with an interesting twist in *Man and Wife*. In *Armada*, Ozias Midwinter, a member of the younger generation of characters, lives in fear of fulfilling what he believes to be his foretold destiny. In *Man and Wife*, it is Anne Silvester Senior who fears that history will repeat itself. As she lies on her deathbed, Anne's thoughts turn to her young daughter's future: "My Anne is my second self [...] She is not called by her father's name—she is called by mine. She is Anne Silvester, as I was! *Will she end like Me?*"" and she implores her old friend, Blanche, "Don't bring her up like Me! She must be a governess—she must get her bread. Don't let her act! don't let her sing! don't let her go on the stage!" (MW, Prologue, Pt. II)

Anne Silvester Junior is, however, destined to re-enact much of her mother's life. Although, as Keith Reierstad points out, 'Collins consciously makes Anne [Junior] the reduplication of her mother,'<sup>63</sup> he is too skilled a writer, too devious a storyteller, to state his case so openly, and this replication centres not merely around the obvious themes of marriage and identity—Anne Junior changes her identity from Vanborough to Silvester to Brinkworth to Delamayn and, finally, to Lundie, in accordance with her marital status, or lack thereof, just as her mother's identity varied between Silvester and Vanborough for the same reason—but more insidiously around the idea of acting, of playing a part, of assuming an identity other than one's own.

Most of the female characters in the novel, good or bad, are soon revealed for what they are. Lady Jane Parnell, the beautiful young widow, who, we are led to believe, is a

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63 Keith Brown Reierstad, 'The Demon in the House: Or, The Domestication of Gothic in the Novels of Wilkie Collins' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1976), p. 306.

woman of high moral—as well as social—standing, witnesses with horror the callous treatment meted out by John Vanborough to his first wife. Almost immediately afterwards, however, we learn that she has recovered from her shock, and, in the words of Mrs Oliphant, ‘Lady Jane marries this monster, with no more than a pretty fie fie at his naughtiness!’<sup>64</sup> Lady Jane is reincarnated, in the second generation, as Mrs Glenarm, Geoffrey Delamayn’s prospective bride. Like her predecessor, she lacks moral judgment, and her attachment to Geoffrey depends wholly on the fact that he is aesthetically pleasing. Mrs Glenarm, Collins tells us, ‘looked what she was, a person possessed of plenty of superfluous money, but not additionally blest with plenty of superfluous intelligence to correspond’ (*MW*, Ch. XXXV). Lady Lundie, Blanche’s hypocritical and canting step-mother, ‘presented to the general observation a cruel aquiline nose, an obstinate straight chin, magnificent dark hair and eyes, [...] and a lazy grace of movement which was attractive at first sight, but inexpressibly monotonous and wearisome on longer acquaintance’ (*MW*, Ch. II).<sup>65</sup> Blanche, herself, is so straightforward that Collins is able to sum her up with an economy of words:

Age, at the present time, eighteen. Position, excellent. Money, certain. Temper, quick. Disposition, variable. In a word, a child of the modern time—with the merits of the age we live in, and the failings of the age we live in—and a substance of sincerity and truth and feeling underlying it all.’ (*MW*, Ch. II)

Even Hester Dethridge, the apparently mute cook-cum-landlady, eventually reveals the secret, which we have long suspected she possesses, in a written confession (*MW*, Ch. LIX). Only Anne remains shrouded in mystery to the end, and it is to Collins’s credit that he is able to create a protagonist who is censured for her lesser sins whilst her greater ones go completely unperceived. Chronologically, she is the first of Collins’s heroines discussed in this chapter; morally, she is the last.

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<sup>64</sup> Mrs Oliphant, unsigned review, p. 628.

<sup>65</sup> The ‘science’ of physiognomy, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis, enjoyed a resurgence of popularity towards the middle of the nineteenth century, and there could have been few Victorian readers who were unfamiliar with certain traits attributed to certain features. For an in depth discussion of physiognomy and its place within nineteenth-century literature, see Jeanne Fahnestock, ‘The Heroine of Irregular Features: Physiognomy and Conventions of Heroine Description’, *Victorian Studies*, 24 (1981), 325-50.

Having just presented us with a description of 'Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank,' Collins now sketches for us what Charlotte Brontë described in *Jane Eyre* as a 'Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain:'

[Anne] had inherited the charm—but not the beauty—of her unhappy mother. Judge her by the standard set up in the illustrated gift-books and the print-shop windows—and the sentence must have inevitably followed, 'She has not a single good feature in her face.' There was nothing individually remarkable about Miss Silvester, seen in a state of repose. She was of the average height. She was as well made as most women. In hair and complexion, she was neither light nor dark, but provokingly neutral, just between the two. Worse even than this, there were positive defects in her face, which it was impossible to deny. A nervous contraction, at one corner of her mouth, drew up the lips out of the symmetrically right line, when they moved. A nervous uncertainty in the eye on the same side narrowly escaped presenting the deformity of a cast. And yet with these indisputable drawbacks, here was one of those women—the formidable few—who have the hearts of men and the peace of families at their mercy. (*MW*, Ch. II)

We should, from this early stage, take heed of Collins's warning. Anne has the power to control men and to wreck the familial harmony of those who cross her. Having already proved in *Armada* that he can manipulate his reader emotionally and morally, Collins has no need to play such games further. In *Man and Wife*, he uses this same skill in a more subtle manner. Rather than reveal Anne as a woman capable of deceit and duplicity, he allows her to beguile not only her fellow characters but also her reading public.

As Reierstad points out, in the nineteenth century, 'the major objection to Anne, [...] was not that of immorality but of inconsistency.'<sup>66</sup> The *Saturday Review* confessed that:

We have a difficulty in putting together the two ends of Miss Silvester's life. The Miss Silvester of the novel is everything that is sensitive and modest and virtuous [...] The Miss Silvester of the previous epoch has been anything but virtuous, or even delicate, in her tastes.<sup>67</sup>

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66 Reierstad, p. 306.

67 Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 764 (1870), 52-53; quoted in Page, p. 183.

Mrs Oliphant, writing for *Blackwood's Magazine*, is aghast that:

Anne the heroine is represented to us as one of the noblest of women. She is pure, proud, full of talent and mental power, with a faculty of attracting everybody [...] Yet she degrades herself to the lowest humiliation possible to a woman [without suffering any] loss of moral dignity, [or] injury to mind or being.<sup>68</sup>

In the twentieth century, however, with the relaxation of moral standards, Anne has been viewed much more favourably. Writing at a time when sex outside marriage has ceased to be shocking, Sue Lonoff is able to regard Anne as 'a refined and discriminating woman of considerable intelligence,'<sup>69</sup> whose only discernible fault seems to be her lamentable taste in men. Sally Mitchell attributes 'consideration, forethought, and great persuasive power' to her, and considers her 'admirable—as a woman—because she suffers voluntarily.'<sup>70</sup> Only Tom Winnifrith, who comments that 'all our sympathy is *meant* to be with [Anne],'<sup>71</sup> seems to be aware that there could possibly be a darker side to Anne's nature, but he stops short of defining the extent to which this reaches.

When we first meet Anne, she is employed by the Lundie family as governess to the young Blanche, thus apparently fulfilling her mother's dying wish. Under circumstances which Collins refrains from revealing, she has become involved with Geoffrey Delamayn, by whom she is now pregnant. However, all is not as it seems: this is no story of a foolish young girl who has been seduced by an upper-class cad. As the novel progresses and we become more familiar with Anne's character, we realize that she is, as Lonoff and Mitchell proclaim, an intelligent, independent and resourceful woman, who would have been unlikely to have taken part in any activity, sexual or otherwise, without fully appreciating its ramifications. Critics, contemporary and modern, have

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<sup>68</sup> Mrs Oliphant, unsigned review, pp. 628-29.

<sup>69</sup> Lonoff, p. 98.

<sup>70</sup> Mitchell, p. 130.

<sup>71</sup> Tom Winnifrith, *Fallen Women in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 139, my italics.

found her relationship with Geoffrey particularly hard to comprehend. Mrs Oliphant felt that Anne 'could not have made the sacrifice of her honour, her delicacy, and her pride, on any but the highest tragical impulse of self-devotion—an impulse which nothing in the hero's character or circumstances called for;' <sup>72</sup> Catherine Peters, who describes Geoffrey as 'a lout,' finds it 'impossible to believe that [Anne] would have been interested in him for a moment, let alone allowed herself to become pregnant by him;' <sup>73</sup> and Sue Lonoff questions whether she would have allowed 'the handsome but crude Geoffrey to seduce her without some compelling motive or at least a hint of passion.' <sup>74</sup> There are two possible answers to these accusations. The first of these is, in the words of Congreve's captive Queen Zara, that 'Heav'n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn'd,/ Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd.' The second, and, I would argue, the more probable, answer is that, not only did Anne have that most compelling of all novelistic motives—revenge—she also, given Geoffrey's obvious physical appeal, no doubt managed to feel just the slightest amount of enthusiasm for her chosen task.

The lawyer who assisted John Vanborough in invalidating his marriage to Anne's mother, thereby bringing about Anne's own illegitimacy, was a Mr Delamayn, Geoffrey's father, now Lord Holchester. Louise Shutt assumes that, as no one ever refers to Anne as a bastard during the course of the novel, her illegitimacy, and Delamayn's part in establishing it, must be secrets which died with Anne's parents: 'Anne herself cannot know the full story, or she would never have formed a relationship with the son of her father's partner in crime.' <sup>75</sup> Surely this very knowledge is reason enough for her to form just such a relationship; if the Delamayns have been instrumental in the loss of her identity as a Vanborough, what could be more fitting than to assume a new identity as a Delamayn?

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<sup>72</sup> Mrs Oliphant, unsigned review, p. 628.

<sup>73</sup> Peters, p. 322.

<sup>74</sup> Lonoff, pp. 97-98.

<sup>75</sup> Shutt, p. 225.

Anne, then, has determined to marry Geoffrey in order to redress the balance of the injustice perpetrated by his father against her mother and herself. Like all Collins's villainesses and anti-heroines, however, Anne is fallible. Allowing Geoffrey to seduce her in order to extract from him a promise of marriage was, perhaps, part of her plan; becoming pregnant was not. Moreover, the man she had intended to ensnare, the man on whose honourable conduct she had counted, suddenly seems less reliable than she had hoped. The fourth chapter of the novel is perhaps the most significant in the whole book, as it is here that Collins shows us, not only the extent of her degradation and despair, but also her underlying determination and self-interest. Not wishing this less vulnerable side of his heroine's nature to assume too prominent a position in his reader's mind, Collins urges his reader to have pity on Anne:

Look at her as she stands there, tortured by the knowledge of her own secret [...] Look at her, bowed down under a humiliation which is unutterable in words. She has seen him below the surface—now when it is too late. She rates him at his true value—now, when her reputation is at his mercy. (*MW*, Ch. IV)

In addition, Anne the unfairly impoverished gentlewoman, obliged to 'get her bread' as a governess, now becomes aware that marriage to Geoffrey will be a somewhat pyrrhic victory: she may be able to take his name for herself and her unborn child, but she will have no share in the fortune which—albeit indirectly—her father helped his to make. As Geoffrey explains:

'I don't want to break my promise—but what can I do? I'm not the eldest son. I'm dependent on my father for every farthing I have; and I'm on bad terms with him already. Can't you see it yourself? You're a lady, and all that, I know. But you're only a governess. It's your interest as well as mine to wait till my father has provided for me. Here it is in a nutshell:—If I marry you now, I'm a ruined man.'

The answer came, this time.

'You villain! if you *don't* marry me, I am a ruined woman!'

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean. Don't look at me in that way!'

'How do you expect me to look at a woman who calls me a villain to my face?'

She suddenly changed her tone. [...] It was plain that one of them must give way. The woman had the most at stake—and the woman set the example of submission.

‘Don’t be hard on me,’ she pleaded. ‘I don’t mean to be hard on *you*. My temper gets the better of me. You know my temper. I am sorry I forgot myself. Geoffrey! my whole future is in your hands.’ (MW, Ch. IV)

Much as Anne might prefer to wait until Geoffrey can offer her the fortune she has schemed to obtain, her pregnancy makes this impossible, and she, the proud avenger of her mother’s disgrace, must tolerate being disparaged as ‘only a governess’. She is a resolute young woman, and not one to be easily deviated from her minutely planned campaign. The temper for which she apologizes is no more genuine than Geoffrey’s avowed regret at having to break his promise to her. She has already realized that taunts—“‘You are one of the fortunate people of this world. You are a nobleman’s son. You are a handsome man. You are popular at your college. You are free of the best houses in England. Are you something besides all this? Are you a coward and a scoundrel as well?’” (MW, Ch. IV)—and insults—“‘I look back at my own infatuation—and I can’t account for it; I can’t understand myself. What was there in *you* [...] to attract such a woman as I am?’” (MW, Ch. IV)—have little effect on her thick-skinned swain, and, thus, she resorts to blackmail: if Geoffrey will not marry her, she will commit suicide, thus creating a scandal which will ruin him.<sup>76</sup> Anne, of course, has no such intention: she simply wishes to leave Geoffrey in a situation from which there is no easy escape route. When, cornered, Geoffrey suggests a private marriage, Anne agrees instantly, making no attempt to hide the fact that he has played into her hands.

Collins clearly has no desire to hide the scheming side to Anne’s nature. Not content with showing that Anne is able to think, as it were, on her feet, Collins also reveals in this exchange that Anne’s schemes have been well researched both legally and logistically, although he leaves their full exposition until the next chapter: Anne is to wait, ostensibly for her husband, at a neighbouring inn, where Geoffrey will join her within the hour. As she explains,

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<sup>76</sup> Roger Dennis, somewhat strangely, observes of Anne that ‘her resourcefulness is seen in her threatening to expose Delamayn’s villainy to the world through her own suicide’ (p. 199)

'You know that we are in Scotland. You know that there are neither forms, ceremonies, nor delays in marriage, here. The plan I have proposed to you secures my being received at the inn, and makes it easy and natural for you to join me there afterwards. The rest is in our own hands. A man and a woman who wish to be married (in Scotland) have only to declare themselves married—and the thing is done.' (*MW*, Ch. V)

Reierstad is, then, quite wrong when he maintains that 'she knows nothing of Scottish marriage law.'<sup>77</sup> Certainly, she knows enough about it to be filled with misgivings when Arnold arrives at the inn in Geoffrey's stead, and she realizes that once more her plans are going awry:

The vague fear of consequences which had taken possession of Anne was not to be trifled with. She had no clear conception of the risk (and, it is to be added, in justice to Geoffrey, that *he* had no clear conception of the risk) on which Arnold had unconsciously ventured [...] Neither of them had any adequate idea (few people have) of the infamous absence of all needful warning, of all decent precaution and restraint, which makes the marriage law of Scotland a trap to catch unmarried men and women, to this day. But, while Geoffrey's mind was incapable of looking beyond the present emergency, Anne's finer intelligence told her that a country which offered such facilities for private marriage as the facilities of which she had proposed to take advantage in her own case, was not a country in which a man could act as Arnold had acted, without danger of some serious embarrassment following as the possible result. (*MW*, Ch. IX)

The embarrassment is, of course, Anne and Arnold's putative marriage, which, potentially, renders Blanche a fallen woman and Arnold a bigamist. As I have stated above, even Collins's most wicked characters are fallible: they possess human weaknesses rare in fictional villains. Anne, whose wickedness extends only to avenging the wrong suffered by her mother, is no exception. Her weakness is her love for Blanche, and it is because she is afraid of distressing her young friend that, when the time comes for her to flee, she resists the temptation of confiding in Blanche the secret of her pregnancy and intended marriage:

'Dearest Blanche! don't think me untrue to the affection we bear towards each other—don't think there is any change in my heart towards you—believe only that I am a very unhappy woman, and that I am in a position which forces me,

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77 Reierstad, p. 303.



against my will, to be silent about myself. Silent even to you, the sister of my love—the one person in the world who is dearest to me!’ (*MW*, Ch. XIII)

It is also because of this sentiment that she later proves herself already married to Geoffrey, even though, with the child now dead, her original scheme has lost much of its appeal.

In order to establish herself as Mrs Delamayn, Anne needs to regain possession of a note which Geoffrey sent her at the inn. This note, in which Geoffrey refers to himself as her husband—thus, according to Scottish law, making him just that—has been stolen by Bishopriggs, the head waiter of the inn. With consummate ease, Anne tracks down the elderly miscreant and, with scant regard for the morality of the situation, purchases her own property for five pounds.

The production of this letter at once confirms that Anne is married to Geoffrey, and condemns her to live with him as his wife. It is this act of self-sacrifice which not only impresses Sally Mitchell (see above), but also fills Sir Patrick Lundie, Blanche’s uncle and guardian, with such unmitigated admiration for her that within six months of Geoffrey’s death, he makes her his wife. This admiration, however, is perhaps not based wholly on reality. He admires a noble woman who sacrifices herself to a cad in order to save her best friend’s good name: at no time are we given to believe that he has even the slightest notion that the object of his reverence is a bastard who willingly entered into a sexual relationship with, and became pregnant by, the man she later claims as her husband. Indeed, there is no reason why he should ever suspect that his wife has ever been anything less than honourable and virtuous, for despite her mother’s dying wish, Anne has become a great and versatile actress: from governess, to temptress, to persecuted wife, to noble lady, her repertoire is endless.

This final pairing of ‘man and wife’ is not without a certain irony. Throughout the novel, Sir Patrick has been depicted as worldly-wise and cynical. Certainly, when advising Arnold about the pitfalls of marriage, he is under no illusions:

‘You go to the tea-shop, and get your moist sugar. You take it on the understanding that it *is* moist sugar. But it isn’t anything of the sort. It’s a

compound of adulterations made up to look like sugar. You shut your eyes to that awkward fact, and swallow your adulterated mess in various articles of food; and you and your sugar get on together in that way as well as you can. Do you follow me so far?’

Yes. Arnold (quite in the dark) followed, so far.

‘Very good,’ pursued Sir Patrick. ‘You go to the marriage shop, and get a wife. You take her on the understanding—let us say—that she has lovely yellow hair, that she has an exquisite complexion, that her figure is the perfection of plumpness, and that she is just tall enough to carry the plumpness off. You bring her home and you discover that it’s the old story of the sugar over again. Your wife is an adulterated article. Her lovely yellow hair is—dye. Her exquisite skin is—pearl powder. Her plumpness is—padding. And three inches of her height are—in the bootmaker’s heels. Shut your eyes, and swallow your adulterated wife as you swallow your adulterated sugar—and, I tell you again, you are one of the few men who can try the marriage experiment with a fair chance of success.’ (MW, Ch. VI)

Unfortunately, his own advice is forgotten, and by marrying Anne, it is he who must swallow the ‘adulterated sugar’, for his wife is certainly not what she seems.

As ‘heartless and depraved’ as her grandparents, Anne, by the end of the story, has triumphed not only over circumstance but over those individuals who have wronged her. Her identity, which like her mother’s, is dependent upon her surname, is finally established unassailably. As a Vanborough, she had a name, and with it an identity, in which she could take pride, but this was callously replaced by Silvester, the name of an actress. Anne’s aspirations to be a Delamayn can, then, also be seen as social aspirations: as the younger son, Geoffrey is unlikely to inherit the title of Lord Holchester, but at least his name is prefixed by ‘Honourable’. Even if Anne felt nothing for Blanche, she would have been loath to marry Arnold, because he, though rich, is a commoner. By marrying Sir Patrick, Anne secures for herself both a fortune and the title of Lady Lundie. Thus, when the novel closes, Anne has defeated all her enemies: Geoffrey and his father are vanquished through death, and Blanche’s unpleasant stepmother, formerly Lady Lundie, has been obliged to surrender her identity as head of the family. As the rather vulgar Miss Houghty will explain in *The Law and the Lady*, “‘Here I am provided for [...] and nothing to do but spend the money. [...] I haven’t

played my cards badly, have I? It's a great advantage to marry an old man—you can twist him round your little finger.”<sup>78</sup>

The other character in *Man and Wife* who may be worthy of being regarded as a good character is the double murderess, Hester Dethridge. Technically, a woman who has killed two men must essentially be termed a villainess, but just as Anne Silvester is a good girl who is really quite wicked, so Hester is a recidivist who is really quite virtuous. Having married a young journeyman in order to escape from the tyranny of her invalid mother, Hester finds herself the victim, not only of her husband's drunken rages (one of which has left Hester with impaired speech), but also of the law's masculine partiality. Any money or goods she owns are, legally, the property of her husband, who may dispose of them as he chooses. Hester's only solution is a legal separation, but that costs more money than she has left. In desperation, she frees herself from her bondage by murdering her husband, but, essentially a good woman, she is forever haunted by the manifestation of her guilt which reminds her of her first crime, and urges her to kill again. When Geoffrey, who has learned her secret, endeavours to blackmail her into ridding him of Anne, Hester is possessed of a 'homicidal frency' (*MW*, Ch. LXII), which she turns on her new tormentor.

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Having used Anne to show the injustices of the Scottish marriage laws, Collins employs Hester to illustrate those of the English legal system with regard to the rights of married women. Marriage, for Anne, is the means of regaining a lost identity; for Hester, however, it signifies the sacrifice of one. Despite the reforms made in the Divorce Act of 1857, a woman, upon marrying, had few rights as a legal entity, becoming instead an extension of her husband, who could imprison her, beat her, and prevent her from having contact with friends, family, and even her own children. Providing he endangered nothing more than her mental well-being, her husband was safe from prosecution, as he would have had to prosecute himself. According to

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78 Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), Chapter L.

William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, a work with which Collins, a former student of law, would have been familiar:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of her husband: under whose wing, protection and *cover*, she performs everything; and is therefore called in our law-French a *feme-covert*; [...] and her condition during the marriage is called her *coverture*.<sup>79</sup>

The idea of *coverture*, and by extension, of imprisonment and being buried alive, is one which pervades the entire novel, and forms a link between the situations of Hester and Anne, whose virtual imprisonment at the Salt Patch house is likened to a living death (*MW*, Ch. LV).

Whilst Anne and Hester's situations may be analogous, however, their characters are not (despite the similarities identified by certain critics),<sup>80</sup> nor can it be said that Hester plays Hyde to Anne's Jekyll. As I have already shown, Anne is possessed of great resourcefulness and determination: she will not allow herself to be beaten by any man. Hester may have the same philosophy, but for her it is an ideal rather than an actuality. Murdering her husband does not free her from persecution: the phantom pursues her and Geoffrey exploits her. Whilst Anne fights back, Hester runs away, until, at the end of the novel, there is nowhere—other than into a lunatic asylum—left for her to flee.

Clearly based on Polly Comber, whose plight was discussed in a factual article in *All the Year Round* in 1868, Hester, too, is 'cursed with a husband who left her, years ago, but

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<sup>79</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, ed. by Edward Christian,, (London: Strahan, 1809, originally 1765-69) I, pp. 441-42; quoted in Maeve E. Doggett, *Marriage, Wife-Beating and the Law in Victorian England* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 1993), p. 35. It was not until 1870, the year in which *Man and Wife* was published, that the Married Women's Property Act was passed, and some of the suffering of women in financially uncomfortable positions was alleviated. Whilst feminists regarded the new Act as a compromise—a married woman was only entitled to regard any money or property acquired after the Act became law as her own; she was not entitled to hold previously acquired property, to sue, or to contract, in her own name as could a *feme sole* (unmarried woman)—many poor women, such as Hester, would have benefited greatly from the reforms. For further details of the events leading up to, and the substance of, this Act, see Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895* (London: Tauris, 1989), chapter 2.

<sup>80</sup> Reierstad, p. 307; Shutt, p. 226; and Taylor, 'Nineteenth-Century Psychology', p. 250.

who turns up periodically to break up her home, to sell the bits of furniture she has gathered together laboriously, to seize her earnings, and then to wallow in the mire again.’<sup>81</sup> The restrictions of Victorian customs and laws meant that such female characters had a very limited sphere of activity. Other nineteenth-century novelists, including Dickens, had accepted this fact, and their heroines frequently appear insipid as a result. Thackeray, with his dislike of Laura Pendennis and his barbs against Amelia Sedley, had chafed against the convention. Collins, however, was more daring, but his audacity had to be subtle lest it offend contemporary readers, just as it has confounded modern critics. In particular, his treatment of good girls who had fallen from grace had to be exceptionally delicate, as this form of escape from restriction was instantly and automatically condemned.

#### IV

In the three novels discussed above, I have attempted to show how Collins uses many of the pairings which we have come to expect from his sensation fiction—sanity/insanity, genteel femininity/proscribed sexuality, legitimacy/illegitimacy, womanly weakness/unwomanly strength—but in such a way as to undermine the manner in which the reader has been taught to evaluate such stereotypes. Carmina Greywell epitomizes helpless femininity, but shows it to be much less appealing than the boisterous, often unseemly, romping of Zoe Gallilee; Mary Germaine and Miss Dunross—two unlikely examples of strong women—illustrate the hostility faced by women whose only crime has been to attempt to protect those weaker than themselves; and Anne Silvester reveals herself to be a paradox of Victorian virtue: at once a dependent termagant and an assertive angel. By her manipulation of the men around her, and by her taking control of her own destiny, she cannot be confined within the social and gender boundaries of her time, and must, by definition, be a ‘feminist’ heroine; nevertheless, she displays many of the weaknesses normally attributed to a

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<sup>81</sup> Unsigned article, ‘Slaves of the Ring’, *All the Year Round* (4 July 1868), 86-88 (p. 88).

more orthodox type of dependent woman. The impetus of Collins's narratives in these novels is determined by the opposition of the conventional to the unconventional, and his plots—more straightforward than those of his sensation novels—probe the subtle ambiguities and deep-seated perplexities to which this gives rise.



## Chapter Two

### FALLEN WOMEN



The figure of the fallen woman is one which appears with some frequency throughout the literature of the Victorian period. Elizabeth Gaskell in *Ruth* (1853), Mrs Henry Wood in *East Lynne* (1861), and Thomas Hardy in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) all tackled the subject, and all, ultimately, bowed to public opinion and concluded that the reintegration of the fallen woman into respectable society was impossible if not actually undesirable. Isabel Vane, in *East Lynne*, suffers disfigurement, bereavement, and death as a result of her transgression; Tess Durbeyfield's fall leads to rejection, murder, and eventually the gallows of Wintoncester gaol; even Ruth Hilton, who is portrayed as blameless and too innocent to comprehend her fallen state, becomes a victim of her creator's inability to sustain the liberalism she appears to be advocating, and in an abrupt reversal, the poor girl is authorially sentenced to a penitential death from typhoid fever. As Nina Auerbach explains,

Generally the fallen woman must die at the end of her story, perhaps because death rather than marriage is the one implacable human change, the only honourable symbol of her fall's transforming power. Death does not simply

punish or obliterate the fallen woman: its ritual appearance alone does her justice.<sup>1</sup>

The retribution meted out to these characters by their authors notwithstanding, the majority of Victorian society reacted—to a greater or lesser degree—unfavourably to the novels; their endings may have yielded to society's sense of morality, but their subject matter had outraged its sense of propriety. Josephine Butler, who for many years campaigned against prostitution and for better standards of education and employment for women, recalls in her memoir of her husband, that a young man of her acquaintance was horrified lest his mother should read *Ruth*, even though she herself found the story to be of 'a very wholesome tendency, though dealing with a painful subject.'<sup>2</sup> Typically, then, when Collins decides to take fallen women as his protagonists, he shows scant regard for society's 'clap-trap morality',<sup>3</sup> and makes no propitiatory gestures towards conventionality.

Although he did not fully address the theme until the 1870s, the redemption of the fallen woman had long been close to Collins's heart. Possibly because of his own relationships with Martha Rudd and Caroline Graves,<sup>4</sup> Collins was more sensitive than

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<sup>1</sup> Auerbach, p. 161.

Modern literature, and indeed modern society, happily accept the sexually active single girl as virtuous enough to live happily ever after, with the man, woman, or career, of her choice. The prostitute, however, remains taboo, and even modern novelists are loath to permit her to renounce her past and settle down to a life of moral normalcy. Elizabeth George, writing in the 1990s, shows a suspiciously Victorian punitivity when she denies Livie, the ex-prostitute-turned-animal-liberationist heroine of *Playing for the Ashes* (London: Bantam, 1994), the love and security she craves, instead condemning her to a slow and degenerative death from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, during which the progressive degeneration of Livie's motor neurones ironically parallels the progressive regeneration of her moral code.

<sup>2</sup> Josephine E. Butler, *Recollections of George Butler* (1892); quoted in Murray, p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Armadale* (London: Smith, Elder, 1866; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Preface.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Peters speculates that Collins may have rescued Caroline from a life of prostitution. Her comment is in response to the often quoted story attributed to John Everett Millais (John G. Millais, *Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, (London 1899), Vol. I, p. 278) in which is described a chance meeting—later thought to be the inspiration for *The Woman in White*—between Collins and 'a young and very beautiful woman dressed in flowing white robes that shone in the moonlight.' According to Millais Junior, Collins subsequently told his father that 'she was a lady of good birth and position, who had accidentally fallen into the hands of a man living in a villa in Regent's Park. There for many months he kept her prisoner under threats and mesmeric influence of so alarming a character that she dared not attempt to escape, until, in sheer desperation, she fled from



many of his contemporaries to the stigma attached to, and the prejudices faced by, women who were known to have been sexually active without the respectable union of marriage. As George Watt asserts:

The fallen-woman novels of Wilkie Collins tell us a great deal about the women who are their subjects. They do, however, tell us more about the society around them. That fact alone makes them well worth reading, and more important than they have been taken to be since their publication.<sup>5</sup>

In the preceding chapter, I examined Collins's treatment of 'good girls'. Of these, both Mary Van Brandt and Anne Silvester could also be regarded as having 'fallen'. They can, however, be exonerated: Mary, who continues to live with a man she knows to be married to another woman, is unaware of the situation until after the birth of their daughter, and it is for the sake of the child that she maintains the charade; Anne, whose plots and schemes may belie the notion of 'goodness', is at least able to hide her fallen state from all but the villain who seduced her, and from the reader, who delights in his privileged position of confidant. The heroines of the three novels discussed in this chapter contrast sharply with Mary and Anne. In *The Evil Genius* (1886), Sydney Westerfield, who lives with a man she knows to be married to another woman, is fully aware of the situation when she gives in to the attraction which destroys her lover's marriage; and in *The New Magdalen* (1873) and *The Fallen Leaves* (1879), the heroines Mercy Merrick and Simple Sally, are prostitutes whose fallen state can be observed by anyone who chances to pass through the less salubrious streets, where they, and countless others like them, ply their trade.

Moreover, Mary and Anne's counterparts, Miss Dunross and Blanche Lundie, remain—despite the former's impure thoughts, and the latter's marital uncertainties—

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the brute.' Peters points out that, if this woman and Caroline Graves were, as is generally believed to be the case, one and the same, 'she was not [...] the mesmerically controlled, high-born mistress of a poker-wielding villain—unless the post was a part-time one.' In reality, she worked for a pittance in a marine store. It is possible that, like the needleworkers and other poor women whom I discuss later in this chapter, she needed in some way to supplement her income. 'Perhaps Wilkie did rescue her,' says Peters, 'from a bully or a pimp rather than a wealthy villain' (pp. 191-92).

<sup>5</sup> George Watt, p. 117.

uncontaminated by their fallen sisters: their morality is untainted from beginning to end. In *The Evil Genius*, *The New Magdalen*, and *The Fallen Leaves*, the alternative heroines—for this would not be Collins if the role of heroine were given to only one character—make their novelistic entrance as morally impeccable, but leave the story having been degraded by some means—divorce, revenge, embezzlement—in the eyes of society.



‘Nobody can write romances for thirty-five years without vicissitudes in the fortunes of his works, without varieties in his inspiration and his skill.’ Thus wrote Andrew Lang in his article of 1890, ‘Mr Wilkie Collins’s Novels’,<sup>6</sup> and indeed, nowhere are these vicissitudes and varieties more discernible than in Collins’s antepenultimate novel, *The Evil Genius*, in which the author examines the joint themes of adultery and divorce. Despite its favourable reception by contemporary critics, whose praise had not been accorded in such measure to any of Collins’s novels, with the exception of *Heart and Science*, for the previous ten years, *The Evil Genius* is easily the most tedious and unsatisfactory of all of Collins’s later novels.

Typically, Collins divides the role of heroine between two characters. The first of these is Sydney Westerfield. Second best to her younger brother, Sydney is placed in the far from loving care of an aunt who runs a small teaching establishment when Mrs Westerfield, who will soon meet with an untimely death, emigrates, with her son and second husband, to America. At the age of sixteen, Sydney offers her services as a governess and is hired by Herbert Linley to educate his small daughter.<sup>7</sup> Sydney immediately leaves the school, and is installed in Herbert’s Scottish mansion, Mount

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<sup>6</sup> *Contemporary Review*, 57 (1890), 20-28, (p. 21).

<sup>7</sup> Mysteriously, and for reasons best known to herself, Lonoff chooses to rename Herbert ‘Rodney’, pp. 155, 156.

Morven, where he lives with his charming wife, Catherine, the second heroine of the novel, as well as his troublesome mother-in-law, Mrs Presty, and his child, Kitty.

Before long, the attraction, which Mrs Presty has long suspected, between Sydney and Herbert develops, although, after a brief embrace in the summerhouse, any liaison between them is discontinued. Catherine, however, discovers her husband's feelings for their governess, and Sydney is dispatched to the service of a neighbouring family. Kitty, meanwhile, cannot bear the separation from her beloved Syd, and weakened by grief, contracts typhoid fever. On medical orders, Sydney is recalled; the child is saved and the passion between Herbert and Sydney is rekindled.

Herbert leaves Catherine and embarks upon a nomadic existence with Sydney. Catherine, persuaded by Mrs Presty and her lawyer, petitions for divorce as the only means of ensuring that custody of Kitty be granted to her. Their union legally at an end, Herbert and Catherine are free to make new marriages. Herbert, however, shows little inclination to make an honest woman out of Sydney, a fact which is instrumental in the disintegration of their affair. Catherine, on the other hand, has no aversion to marrying again, but finds herself in a difficult situation. Having been ostracized by society as a divorcee, she has, on her mother's advice, reverted to her maiden name of Norman, and claimed to be a more socially acceptable widow. It is as the Widow Norman that Catherine meets and becomes betrothed to a friend of Herbert's brother, a Captain Bennydeck, who, as well as being the proprietor of a home for fallen women, is attempting to locate the long-lost daughter of his former ship-mate, Roderick Westerfield.

Eventually, Catherine can no longer maintain the deception, and confesses her divorced state to Bennydeck. Although he admires her for the effort this has taken, he no longer feels able to marry her, as he regards marriage as a sacred union which cannot be broken merely at the whim of the law. Instead, he urges a reconciliation between Herbert and Catherine, who do, ultimately, remarry. Bennydeck finally tracks down his old friend's daughter, whom he employs as his secretary, although the last lines of the novel imply that it will only be a matter of time before his secretary becomes his wife.

As I have already remarked, although plot summaries of Collins's novels are inevitably banal, the full story is usually of much greater interest. Unfortunately, in this case, the reverse is true. Subtitled *A Domestic Story*, *The Evil Genius* is Collins's attempt at realism. Absent are the duped innocents, the scheming villains, and the forthright heroines whom we have come to associate with Collins's works. Instead, we are presented with a series of morally and emotionally frail characters, who fall into sin, not out of inherent wickedness, but because they lack the fortitude to resist it. Even the misguided and meddlesome Mrs Presty, whom many critics choose to identify as the evil genius of the title, invariably acts in what she believes to be the best interests of those she loves. In Robert Ashley's view, this 'absence of sensationalism did not impair the book's readability, but added to its credibility.'<sup>8</sup> Readable *The Evil Genius* may be, because even at his worst, Collins remains more entertaining than many of his contemporaries at their best, but credible the novel is not.

The opinion given by Anthony Trollope in his *Autobiography*, published in 1883, whilst not entirely laudatory, is a wholly accurate account of Collins's works prior to *The Evil Genius*:

Wilkie Collins seems so to construct his [novels] that he not only, before writing, plans everything on, down to the minutest detail, from the beginning to the end; but then plots it all back again, to see that there is no piece of necessary dove-tailing which does not dove-tail with absolute accuracy. The construction is most minute and most wonderful. But I can never lose the taste of the construction. The author seems always to be warning me to remember that something happened at exactly half-past two o'clock on Tuesday morning, or that a woman disappeared from the road just fifteen yards beyond the fourth milestone. One is constrained by mysteries and hemmed in by difficulties, knowing, however, that the mysteries will be made clear, and the difficulties overcome at the end of the third volume.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, (London: Blackwood, 1883; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 165.

Trollope goes on to add, 'Such work gives me no pleasure.' Perhaps *The Evil Genius* would have been more to his taste. The plot is poorly constructed, the dove-tails are ill-hewn, and Collins's trade-mark coincidences, which previously had been endowed with a certain credibility given the sensational context in which they were located, suddenly seem contrived and unnecessary when superimposed upon what is essentially a realistic story. Would it not have been more plausible for a lawyer to communicate the news of Mrs Westerfield's murder, and her son's disappearance, to Sydney, than for her to learn of these events by means of an article in an American illustrated newspaper which Herbert's brother, Randal, chances to bring back for Kitty's amusement? Could Collins not have thought of a more convincing meeting between Sydney and Herbert and Catherine and Mrs Presty than having them all congregate in a far away town, in the hotel rooms which Bennydeck has happened to relinquish to Catherine and her mother, and which they, in turn, have happened to vacate for the new arrivals, who, by sheer coincidence, have happened to be Herbert and his mistress? It is not the taste of the construction which lingers here, but that of its absence.

Moreover, Collins seems to be warning us to bear in mind, not events on Tuesday mornings, or strange disappearances near significant landmarks, but the presence of Herbert's brother, Randal, and the absence of Sydney's brother, whose name is never revealed. Randal makes his appearance early in the book, and, although he does not contribute significantly to the action of the plot, he is constantly present. Despite being less attractive physically than Herbert, Randal possesses great charm and integrity. 'Everybody was fond of Randal; even Mrs Presty included,' Collins assures us.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Randal, the only truly likeable character in the entire story, is, at the end of the novel, abandoned to whatever fate may befall him. Despite his kindness to the poor Highland families who live on the Linley estate, as well as to his own family, Randal is given no reward in the form of a romantic attachment to either his brother's cast-off wife or his brother's cast-off mistress. The prospect of the former liaison is

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<sup>10</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1886; repr. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 1994), Ch. IV.

even hinted at by the lawyer, Mr Sarrazin, who 'had known Mrs Linley before her marriage, and had been inclined to think that she would have done wisely if she had given her hand to the younger brother instead of to the elder' (*EG*, Ch. XXVIII). Sydney's brother, likewise, is curiously abandoned somewhere in the wilds of America. The occasional references to him lead the reader, who from past experience is convinced that Collins is incapable of including any extraneous characters, to believe that this errant sibling will, at any moment, reappear—either as the villain of the piece, having inherited his mother's mercenary ways, and learned his step-father's murderous ones, or, *Cranford*-like, as his sister's benefactor. Some of the difficulties may have been overcome, but by the end of the third volume of *The Evil Genius*, there remain some far from clear mysteries.

Collins's excursion into domestic realism is an unfortunate one. As well as weakening the story, this experiment does little to win sympathy for Collins's case: that even those women who have been instrumental in their own fall are entitled to compassion and a place in society.<sup>11</sup> *The Evil Genius* deals with two stigmatized women: Sydney Westerfield who lives with another woman's husband, and Catherine Linley who is alienated from society because of her divorced condition.

From the start of the novel, Collins goes to great lengths in his attempt to establish Sydney as an innocent victim of a cruel world. He introduces her to us as a ten year old child, ignored in favour of her younger brother, not only by her 'showy' mother (*EG*, Before the Story, Ch. II), but also by her apparently more caring father. Sydney's love and compassion for the latter are evident, but, as he lies dying, he requests that she be taken away because he wants his son to take her place. It will be Sydney's destiny to replay this love/rejection scene throughout her story.

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<sup>11</sup> R. Beaton's views on *The Evil Genius* are almost completely opposed to mine: 'Sydney Westerfield's story in *The Evil Genius* presents the Magdalen theme in its final and most convincing form,' he states, before reiterating that '*The Evil Genius* is the most successful of the Magdalen novels because reality of situation, development of plot, credible characterisation, and moral design are harmoniously interwoven.' (R. Beaton, 'The World is Hard on Women: Women and Marriage in the Novels of Wilkie Collins' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of North Wales, Bangor, 1987), p. 94.)

Sydney is further confirmed as an object of pity in the highly sentimentalized description of the child's fantasy world, into which she escapes from 'Mrs Westerfield's habitual neglect of her eldest child' (*EG*, Before the Story, Ch. IV). A servant girl opens the door of the garret to which Sydney has been banished:

The grimy ceiling, slanting downwards to a cracked window, was stained with rain that had found its way through the roof. The faded wall-paper, loosened by damp, was torn away in some places, and bulged loose in others. There were holes in the skirting-board; and from one of them peeped the brightly timid eyes of the child's only living companion in the garret—a mouse, feeding on crumbs which she had saved from her breakfast.

Syd looked up when the mouse darted back into its hole, on the opening of the door. 'Lizzie! Lizzie!' she said gravely, 'you ought to have come in without making a noise. You have frightened away my youngest child.'

The good-natured servant burst out laughing. 'Have you got a large family, Miss?' she inquired, humouring the joke.

Syd failed to see the joke. 'Only two more,' she answered as gravely as ever—and lifted up from the floor two miserable dolls, reduced to the last extremity of dirt and dilapidation. 'My two eldest,' this strange child resumed, setting up the dolls against one of the empty trunks. 'The eldest is a girl, and her name is Syd. The other is a boy, untidy in his clothes, as you see. Their kind Mamma forgives them when they are naughty, and buys ponies for them to ride on, and always has something nice for them to eat when they are hungry. Have you got a kind Mamma, Lizzie? And are you very fond of her?'

Those innocent allusions to the neglect which was the one sad experience of Syd's young life touched the servant's heart. [...]

'If the child would only make some complaint,' she burst out, 'it wouldn't be so dreadful!' (*EG*, Before the Story, Ch. IV)

Again, Sydney's uncomplaining acceptance of her sad plight is something which will constantly recur throughout the novel. Whilst Collins no doubts wishes us to interpret this martyred resignation as an indication of Sydney's true goodness, one cannot help concurring with the good-natured servant's view that 'it'—in this instance, the novel—would be considerably improved if Syd were, once in a while, to vent her spleen a little.

Sydney's experiences at the hands of her mother's unmarried sister, Miss Wigger, further contribute to her victimization. Although she begs her mother not to abandon her to the mercies of this 'inveterately ill-natured woman' (*EG*, Before the Story, Ch. IX), Sydney's pleas fall upon deaf ears, and she is left 'in the saddest sense of the word,

alone in the world' (*EG*, Before the Story, Ch. X). Desperate to escape Miss Wigger's school, the now sixteen year old Sydney places an advertisement in a newspaper, offering her services as a governess, an act for which she is to be publicly punished: "When my aunt heard of it," Sydney tells Catherine, the mother of her young pupil, "she insisted on my begging her pardon before the whole school" (*EG*, Ch. III). Her refusal to do this results in her immediate dismissal from Miss Wigger's establishment, and, were it not for the salvation offered to her by the Linleys, a life of 'starv[ation] in the streets' (*EG*, Ch. III) would have been her certain fate.

Thus far, Sydney's career has closely followed that of Jane Eyre; both have to contend with unfeeling aunts, unpleasant schools, and public humiliation; both use newspaper advertisements as a means of starting a new life; and both find themselves in thrall to the charms of married men. Sydney, however, lacks Jane's feisty spirit: she does not wonder how another can be so accepting of the injustice against which she herself rails. Anxious to please and submissive, Sydney, in this respect, resembles Helen Burns rather than Jane Eyre, and it is this subservience, this lack of self-assertiveness, which makes her lifeless and insubstantial.<sup>12</sup>

When Edward Rochester, in 1847, wants Jane to become his mistress, she recoils in horror from the prospect of living with the husband of another woman, despite the intensity of her love for him. With a violent and unbalanced wife in the attic, and divorce impossible, Rochester's adulterous designs are perhaps in some small way justifiable, just as Jane's capitulation would be understandable. Herbert and Sydney, however, have no such excuse: Mrs Linley is gracious, beautiful, and readily visible in the drawing-room of Mount Morven. Herbert's passion for Sydney is no more than a temporary aberration, as becomes evident in his reluctance to marry her even though

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<sup>12</sup> As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, contemporary reviewers displayed a distinct penchant for Collins's parodically helpless females. Just as Laura Fairlie, Norah Vanstone, and Carmina Graywell were greeted with approbation, so the *Athenaeum* reviewer found that 'There is a great deal of delicacy in the portraiture of poor Sydney Westerfield, whom no reader will have the heart to visit too harshly for her various shortcomings' ('Novels of the Week', *Athenaeum*, 3073 (1886), 367).



the law now permits him to do so, and hers for him is merely an echo of her childhood fantasies of love and plenty. Having known nothing but hardship and cruelty, Sydney imagines herself to be in love with the first man who shows her any kindness and consideration. As the Bishop of Oxford observed in 1857, in a Parliamentary debate on divorce and its causes, ‘the woman is led astray, not by the direct temptation of sensual appetite, but by the proffer of affection.’<sup>13</sup>

Catherine Linley is also led astray, although in her case the corrupting influence is not proffered affection but maternal advice. Essentially noble and honest, Catherine finds herself the victim of her husband’s treachery, and understandably turns to her mother for guidance. When Herbert wants access to Kitty, it is Mrs Presty, along with the lawyer, who proves to Catherine that the only way to prevent the child from being removed from her care is to file for divorce. When Catherine eventually consents to this, she also puts in motion her own social, if not—yet—moral, fall: both she and Kitty are ostracized from society, lest other reputations be besmirched by association. Again, it is Mrs Presty who suggests a way in which Catherine may regain her social standing:

‘Deceive the vile world, Catherine, as it deserves to be deceived. Shelter yourself behind a respectable character that will spare you these insults in the future.’ In the energy of her conviction, Mrs Presty struck her fist on the table, and finished in three audacious words: ‘Be a Widow!’[...]

‘Don’t doubt about it,’ Mrs Presty went on; ‘do it. Think of Kitty if you won’t think of yourself.’ (EG, Ch. XXXV)

Again, Catherine consents, even though the lie necessitates informing her daughter that her father is dead. Restored to her former position socially, Catherine’s moral fall is now complete. Her decision to reveal the truth to Bennydeck rather than to marry him under a false identity horrifies Mrs Presty—“‘Upon my word, Catherine, I am ashamed of you. Have you no principles?’” (EG, Ch. XLVII)—and prevents her marriage to Bennydeck from going ahead. Despite this setback, Catherine is ultimately redeemed

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<sup>13</sup> Hansard, 6/9/1857, 1417; quoted in Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; repr. London: Virago, 1989), p. 225n36.

both morally and socially—by remarriage to the man who wronged her. In *Adultery in the Novel*, Tony Tanner holds that:

For bourgeois society, marriage is the all-subsuming, all-organizing, all containing contract. It is the structure that maintains the Structure, or System (if we may use that word, for the moment, to cover all the models, conscious and unconscious, by which society structures all its operations and transactions).<sup>14</sup>

Catherine's second marriage to Herbert may not be the idyll she once imagined her first marriage to him to be, but the corollary to her acceptance of the terms of this inescapable contract is society's acceptance of her as a respectable woman. Once more, Catherine, a victim not only of her husband's treachery, but also of her own honesty and of society's prejudice, is a respectably contained wife and mother, and as such no longer poses a threat to the fragile framework of social order.

In this way Collins succeeds in resolving the problems of at least four of his protagonists, and, perhaps, in showing that even adulteresses and divorcees are not always wholly to blame for their sins. Nevertheless, upon finishing *The Evil Genius* the reader cannot help but feel that, if Sydney, Herbert, and Catherine had had more principles, and Bennydeck fewer, many of their predicaments could easily have been avoided, and a more interesting novel written in its stead.



Whilst *The Evil Genius* leaves much to be desired, both as a thesis novel, and as an entertaining story, *The New Magdalen* and *The Fallen Leaves* are infinitely more successful on both counts. Both novels take as their heroines reformed, or reforming, prostitutes. To those upright Victorian citizens who so eagerly wished to be seen to uphold the cultural ideal of the sexless and subservient domestic angel, the figure of the prostitute—both in literature and in the streets—represented a disquieting reminder

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<sup>14</sup> Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 15.

of the exception that disproved the rule. At a time when women were expected to live quiet lives of sheltered innocence, prostitutes stood on street corners, revealing their forbidden knowledge for all to see. Because of their overt sexuality and the brashness of their behaviour, they not only threatened the image of the demure and morally pure woman, but also, through their financial self-sufficiency, subverted the notion of women's economic dependency on men. As Judith Walkowitz asserts:

Superficially, prostitution seemed to operate as an arena of male supremacy, where women were bartered and sold as commodities. In reality, women often controlled the trade and tended to live together as part of a distinct female subgroup. Prostitutes were still not free of male domination, but neither were they simply passive victims of male sexual abuse.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, prostitutes caused such unease that they were regarded as what Janet Murray describes as 'a separate class of womanhood'.<sup>16</sup> This differentiation on the one hand allowed the myth of the domestic angel to flourish, and on the other promoted the sexual double standard which demanded female chastity whilst turning a blind eye to 'natural' male promiscuity.<sup>17</sup> Married to his exemplarily innocent bride, to whom any form of sexual display must be repellent, a normal, healthy man might easily turn for physical gratification to that sub-species of woman whose evolutionary process had not yet precluded the enjoyment of carnality.

Despite the apparent convenience of a situation which allowed men to satisfy their sexual appetites whilst at the same time protecting 'nice' women from unwanted advances, and enabling a certain group of women to earn their own income, there was,

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<sup>15</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Murray, p. 388.

<sup>17</sup> This double standard is illustrated by the comments of Lord Oranmore and Brown, who, in 1884, in reference to a bill to establish the age of consent at fourteen (rather than sixteen, which was the age recommended by the anti-vice lobby), expressed the belief that 'there were very few of their Lordships who had not, when young men, been guilty of immorality. He hoped that they would pause before passing a clause within the range of which their sons might come [as] the more they attempted to prevent the indulgence of natural passion, the more they would face unnatural crime.' The anti-vice lobby won the day, but his lordship's views were far from atypical. (*Hansard*, 24/7/1884, 1219; quoted in Trevor Fisher, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of Late Victorian Britain* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995), pp. 53-54).

in the latter half of the nineteenth century, no shortage of moralists, missionaries, and social reformers in general, dedicated to 'rescuing' these fallen women from their lives of shame and degradation.<sup>18</sup> Dickens, for example, although no saint himself, was keenly interested in the rehabilitation of such women, even to the extent of supervising the running of Angela Burdett-Coutts's Urania Cottage as a refuge for 'homeless' women. Both Dickens and Burdett-Coutts seem to have advocated a strict and punitive regime for their charges. Unlike his former mentor, however, Collins reveals no desire to punish fallen women for their transgressions; rather he exhorts society to treat them with leniency, forgiveness, and acceptance. He had, in fact, evinced an interest in fallen women and their welfare in 1850, the year before he and Dickens—whose frequently expressed stern public views on the matter seem fortunately to have had little effect on Collins's—became acquainted. In that year, Collins appeared in *A Court Duel*, a play which he himself had adapted from the French; the proceeds of this performance were to benefit the Female Emigration Fund, a charitable organization dedicated to the relocation of reformed prostitutes to the colonies. Despite his youthful enthusiasm for such schemes, by the 1870s Collins had come to realize that emigration was not always the solution it appeared to be. Although he seems to favour the idea in *The Fallen Leaves*, his underlying scepticism is more apparent in *The New Magdalen*.

*The New Magdalen* tells the story of Mercy Merrick's impersonation of Grace Roseberry, a woman believed to have died in a mortar attack in the Franco-Prussian war. In the course of the novel, Mercy, the now reformed Magdalen of the title, who has recently returned from the colonies where her sordid past has caught up with her, is confronted by the real Grace who, understandably, is more than a little anxious to reveal Mercy's deception and to be reinstated in her rightful place. Mercy is, however, not presented as a self-seeking jezebel who will scheme to preserve her new-found façade of respectability; instead, Collins skilfully portrays a woman tormented by a moral

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<sup>18</sup> Murray suggests that some of these individuals may have had somewhat mixed motives in their reformatory zeal, and were often drawn towards such causes because of 'intense sexual curiosity' (p. 388), whilst Walkowitz attributes their concerns 'in part [to] a sincere crisis of conscience, in part [to] an attempt to ameliorate a social problem that had aroused intense class antagonisms' (*Prostitution*, p. 34).

dilemma—should she maintain the imposture, and the comfortable life that goes with it, or should she reveal her true identity, and face the consequences?

Mercy is, we learn, albeit not until the final fifth of the novel, the daughter of a gentleman and a strolling actress, originally of good family but disowned after making an ‘unsuitable’ marriage with one of her father’s grooms.<sup>19</sup> Orphaned at the age of ten, Mercy survives by picking hops, selling matches, and begging in the streets, until she is rescued by a well-to-do couple. All is well until the husband falls in love with Mercy. Too proud and virtuous to become his mistress, Mercy flees the house and attempts to earn a living as a needleworker: “It is needless for me to tell you how miserably work of that sort is remunerated—you have read about it in the newspapers,” she remarks.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, just as a reference to a governess was guaranteed to provoke a certain reaction in Victorian readers, so was one to a needleworker. From the publication in 1843 of Thomas Hood’s sentimental poem, ‘The Song of the Shirt’, needleworkers had come to represent the plight of the poor in the middle-class imagination, and their situation was frequently discussed in newspapers and magazines during the following years.<sup>21</sup> Henry

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19 When Collins’s men marry beneath themselves, the union is usually (though not always) depicted as a happy one; when his women choose a husband of lower social standing, the marriage is almost inevitably doomed to failure. In ‘*I Say No*’, Alban Morris reveals that his betrothed wife also ran away with her groom, and subsequently degenerated to her new husband’s level. An exception could be made in the case of Collins’s short story, ‘Miss Mina and the Groom’, written five years after *The New Magdalen*, in which the author returns to the theme of the well-born lady who marries a groom. Whilst this marriage between unequals is proven to be a success, the story ends not on a note of triumph but on one of warning: “Haven’t I proved that I was right when I married my groom?” asks Mina of her uncle. “No, my dear,” replies the old man, “You have only proved that you are a lucky woman.” (‘Miss Mina and the Groom’, originally published in the *Belgravia Annual* for 1878, and, under the title ‘A Shocking Story’, in *Barnes’ International Review*, 2 November 1878; repr. in *Little Novels* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1887; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1977), and in *Wilkie Collins: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. by Julian Thompson (London: Robinson, 1995), pp. 639-60.)

20 Wilkie Collins, *The New Magdalen* (London: R. Bentley and Son, 1873; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1993), Ch. XXVII.

21 With fingers weary and worn,  
With eyelids heavy and red,  
A woman sat, in unwomanly rags,  
Plying her needle and thread—  
Stitch! stitch! stitch!  
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,  
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch  
She sang the ‘Song of the Shirt!’  
.....  
‘Oh! Men, with sisters dear!  
Oh! Men! with mothers and wives!

Mayhew, in his article 'Labour and the London Poor', wrote at length about the suffering of 'needlewomen forced to take to the streets,'<sup>22</sup> and Janet Murray confirms that 'needleworkers were notorious for occasionally dabbling in prostitution.'<sup>23</sup> Mercy, however, does not 'dabble' from choice. Weak with hunger, she faints in the street, and immediately falls prey to an unscrupulous man who, having drugged her, rapes her and then incarcerates her in a brothel. Beguiled thus into prostitution, Mercy makes several fruitless attempts to escape from 'the life which set a mark on [her] for the rest of [her] days' (NM, Ch. XXVII) and to rejoin respectable society. She is imprisoned, wrongly, for theft; she enters a Refuge and is found a series of domestic situations in respectable houses; she is dismissed because her beauty attracts the unwanted attentions of the sons of the house, or because her past is revealed and the other servants refuse to work with her. Eventually, she is sent to Canada, to begin a new life, but—and here we see Collins's cynical view of emigration schemes—her past is once again discovered, and her only alternative is to return to the Refuge in London.

This, then, was Mercy's life before she became a Red Cross nurse in France. Although Collins reveals to the reader in the second chapter of the novel that his heroine is a 'sincerely penitent' fallen woman, none of the circumstances which led to her fall are divulged until the end of the story. Nevertheless, Collins makes it clear from the start that despite her sordid past, and the mark which she feels has been set upon her by this past, Mercy shows no sign of being other than a pure and chaste woman, of noble birth and high morals. She enters the story—

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It is not linen you're wearing out,  
 But human creatures' lives!  
 Stitch—stitch—stitch,  
 In poverty, hunger, and dirt,  
 Sewing at once, with a double thread,  
 A Shroud as well as a Shirt.'

From Thomas Hood, 'The Song of the Shirt', *Punch*, 5 (1843), 260 (omitted from index to Volume 5).

<sup>22</sup> *The Unknown Mayhew: Selections from the 'Morning Chronicle', 1849-50*, ed. by E. P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 200.

<sup>23</sup> Murray, p. 351.

[...] tall, lithe, and graceful—attired in her uniform dress of neat black stuff, with plain linen collar and cuffs, and with the scarlet cross of the Geneva Convention embroidered on her left shoulder. Pale and sad, her expression and her manner both eloquently suggestive of suppressed suffering and sorrow, there was an innate nobility in the carriage of this woman's head, an innate grandeur in the gaze of her large grey eyes, and in the lines of her finely-proportioned face, which made her irresistibly striking and beautiful, seen under any circumstance and clad in any dress. (*NM*, Ch. I)

Moreover, her manner is such that even the snobbish Grace Roseberry, who would surely pride herself upon being able to tell the difference between a real aristocrat and a mere actress playing the part of one, can find only one reason to account for her new acquaintance's somewhat reticent attitude towards her:

'Is there some romance in your life?' [Grace] asked. 'Why have you sacrificed yourself to the terrible duties which I find you performing here? You interest me indescribably. Give me your hand.'

Mercy shrank back, and refused the offered hand.

'Are we not friends?' Grace asked in astonishment.

'We can never be friends.'

'Why not?'

The nurse was dumb. She had shown a marked hesitation when she had mentioned her name. Remembering this, Grace openly avowed the conclusion at which she had arrived. 'Should I be guessing right,' she asked, 'if I guessed you to be some great lady in disguise?' (*NM*, Ch. I)

By establishing Mercy as a nurse, Collins goes some way towards blurring the line between the dangerous sexuality of the streetwalker and the virginal purity of the nurse. Although the number of Victorians who genuinely believed nurses to be 'angels of mercy' remains a matter of speculation, what is certain is that this was the usual image presented of them by the literature of the day. As Grace indicates, nursing was, in the second half of the nineteenth century, generally regarded as a sacrificial task, often linked with a philanthropic or religious vocation. The earlier image of the nurse, which had flourished until mid-century, had largely been replaced, in no small part due to the reformatory zeal of Florence Nightingale, who entered the profession at a time when, according to Lytton Strachey,

A 'nurse' meant then a coarse old woman, always ignorant, usually dirty, often brutal, a Mrs Gamp, in bunched-up sordid garments, tippling at the brandy

bottle or indulging in worse irregularities. The nurses in the hospitals were especially notorious for immoral conduct; sobriety was almost unknown among them; and they could hardly be trusted to carry out the simplest medical duties.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly Collins does not expect Mercy, despite her previous 'immoral conduct' to be viewed in this light. Not only does he wish us to view her as a reformed prostitute, but also as a reformed nurse.

In her 'Subsidiary Notes as to the Introduction of Female Nursing into Military Hospitals', Florence Nightingale described a hospital nurse as one who could easily accept the need for 'obedience, discipline, self-control, work understood as work, hospital service as implying masters, civil and medical, and a mistress, what service means, and abnegation of self.'<sup>25</sup> Isabella Beeton, whilst less military in tone, felt that, 'the main requirements [of a sick-nurse] are good temper, compassion for suffering, sympathy with sufferers, which most women worthy of the name possess, neat-handedness, quiet manners, love of order, and cleanliness.'<sup>26</sup> The nurse, then—obedient, selfless, quiet and clean—despite the intimate character of her relationship with her male patients, was the exact antithesis of the prostitute. As Mary Poovey remarks, it was understood that 'nursing required the renunciation of some component of those social relations that might be assumed to obtain when contact is both intimate and physical—that nursing, in other words, both intimated and specifically sacrificed sexuality.'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1918; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), pp. 131-32.

<sup>25</sup> 'Subsidiary Notes as to the Introduction of Female Nursing into Military Hospitals', reprinted in *Selected Writings of Florence Nightingale*, ed. Lucy Ridgely Seymer (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Isabella Beeton, *Beeton's Book of Household Management* (London: S. O. Beeton, 1861), p. 265.

<sup>27</sup> Poovey, p. 177.



Seen thus as the exemplification of pure, self-sacrificing womanhood, Mercy not only gives the lie, as far as physical appearances are concerned, to her past, but she also maintains the illusion when she speaks. She has 'a soft voice, with an underlying melancholy in it, [which is] plainly distinguishable' (*NM*, Ch. I)—she does not have the accent which one would most readily associate with a child brought up in the slums and back-streets of London. Sally Mitchell regards this as one of the major flaws in Collins's depiction of Mercy Merrick, and complains that despite the character's past, 'Her grammar and her purity are [...] both miraculously intact.'<sup>28</sup> In addition, Catherine Peters, in reference to the stage version of *The New Magdalen*, accounts for the implausibility of Mercy's received pronunciation by the fact that cockney accents were reserved for comic characters in the 1870s.<sup>29</sup> Both Mitchell and Peters are, I feel, a little hasty in their condemnation. Mercy herself explains that she was taken in off the streets at the age of thirteen by a 'highly-accomplished woman; greatly her husband's superior in cultivation,' whose 'one great happiness was in teaching me. [...] At my pliant age I soon acquired the refinements of language and manner which characterised my mistress. It is only the truth to say, that the cultivation which has made me capable of personating a lady was her work' (*NM*, Ch. XXVIII).

Whilst Mercy's speech patterns are accounted for, her innate nobility and goodness are not so readily explicable. Perhaps Collins is, in part, entering into the nature/nurture debate to which he will contribute more fully, and indeed more scathingly, in *The Legacy of Cain*: Mercy is, after all, the daughter of an impoverished gentlewoman and could have inherited her integrity of character from her mother. Such a pro-nature argument, which ignores any genetic contribution from Mercy's father, an unscrupulous 'man of high rank; proud of his position, and well known in the society of that time for his many accomplishments and his refined tastes' (*NM*, Ch. XXVII), is, to

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<sup>28</sup> Peters, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> See Peters, p. 339. Peters also observes that Collins's mistress, Caroline Graves, who acted as his hostess, housekeeper, nurse, and travelling companion, 'had a chameleon-like ability to adapt to [her] improved circumstances, even if an innate vulgarity still showed through' (p. 200). Clearly Collins's fictional fallen woman is able to overcome even this obstacle.

say the least, clumsy—if it is sincere. This would not, however, be the first time that Collins has mocked the dominant way of thinking. Indeed, just as he lampoons those who maintain that a prostitute is forever beyond the pale as far as respectable society is concerned, he also shows how ridiculous it is to depend on lineage—or elocution—as a character-determining factor, something especially evident in the attitudes of Horace Holmcroft and Grace Roseberry, to which I shall return later in this chapter. Here, as elsewhere, Collins's opinion is clearly that we are what we are, regardless of what our parents were, or what we have been brought up to be.

This is further emphasized by the reaction of Lady Janet Roy to Mercy, both before and after the imposture has been discovered. Mercy assumes the identity of Grace Roseberry after the latter has been wounded and apparently killed on the French front. Grace was *en route* to England, from Canada, to become the companion of Lady Janet, an acquaintance of her late father. After much soul-searching and deliberation, Mercy realizes that the opportunity is too providential to be missed:

Grace had said it herself in so many words—she and Lady Janet had never seen each other. Her friends were in Canada; her relations in England were dead. Mercy knew the place in which she had lived—the place called Port Logan—as well as she had known it herself. [...] She had no accomplished lady to personate: Grace had spoken herself [...] of her neglected education. Everything, literally everything, was in the lost woman's favour. [...] The way of escape from the unendurable humiliation of her present life lay open before her at last. What a prospect it was! A new identity, which she might own anywhere! a new name, which was beyond reproach! a new past life, into which all the world might search, and be welcome! Her colour rose, her eyes sparkled; she had never been so irresistibly beautiful as she looked at the moment when the new future disclosed itself, radiant with new hope. (NM, Ch. IV)

Upon arriving at Mablethorpe House, Mercy is instantly made welcome by the unsuspecting Lady Janet:

At first sight, Lady Janet had yielded to the fascination of the noble and interesting face. No need to present the stolen letter [of introduction]; no need to repeat the ready-made story. The old lady had put the letter aside unopened, and had stopped the story at the first words. 'Your face is your introduction, my dear; your father can say nothing for you which you have not already said for yourself.' (NM, Ch. VI)

Even when Lady Janet realizes that her 'adopted daughter' is not all she has made out, she is able to mitigate Mercy's behaviour:

'Not a living creature in this house shall say she has deceived me. She has *not* deceived me—she loves me! What do I care whether she has given me her true name or not? She has given me her true heart.' (NM, Ch. XXIII)

Lady Janet, who, like Sir Patrick in *Man and Wife*, speaks for Collins, is able to distinguish between true essence and false appearance. She is able to appreciate Mercy's finer qualities, which she feels are inherent, and disregard the ignobler ones, which she feels to have been acquired through necessity and desperation.

Mercy has not given her true name to her benefactress, and Collins has not given it to us. Only the travelling players who knew her as a small child and—possibly—the Matron at the Refuge appear to be privy to this information. 'Mercy Merrick', she informs Grace Roseberry, is the name she assumed when she left England. As we have already seen, in *The Two Destinies* and *Man and Wife*, the heroines' identities are dependent upon their names. In *The New Magdalen* Collins inverts and augments this idea: Mercy's name depends upon the identity which she has assumed, or, has been made to assume. Originally known by her mother's name, Mercy is, at the age of five, renamed:

'I was the favourite pet and plaything of the poor actors. They taught me to sing and to dance, at an age when other children are just beginning to learn to read. At five years old I was in what is called "the profession," and had made my poor little reputation in booths at country fairs. As early as that [...] I had begun to live under an assumed name—the prettiest name they could invent for me, "to look well in the bills." It was sometimes a struggle for us, in bad seasons, to keep body and soul together [...] and yet I have lived to look back on my days with the strolling players as the happiest days of my life!' (NM, Ch. XXVII)

The 'poor actors' have, thus, created from the clay that is Mercy a performer, and they have labelled her accordingly. Although she claims that she is happy, she is passive. When given a home by the mismatched couple, Mercy determines that her next identity should not be that of their servant, but that of their child. Inevitably, that is not to be: the husband is determined that she should become his mistress, and pursues her

relentlessly, resolved to bend her to his will; the wife, unable to believe that such a liaison is desired only by her husband, labels Mercy the guilty party. Again, she attempts to shape her own destiny by working as a needlewoman, and again she is thwarted. Drugged, raped, and kidnapped, she is recreated as a prostitute. This incarnation, imposed upon her by the pander who violated her, proves to be much harder to escape from than the precarious identities she had previously struggled to establish for herself. Rather than being able to reform herself as a respectable member of society, she finds herself wrongly imprisoned and wrongly labelled a thief. A self-preserving handkerchief-thief has imposed this erroneous identity upon her, and it is one which follows her from England, to Canada, and back again. Try as she might to recreate herself as virtuous and decent, her past invariably returns to haunt her.

These changes in fortune, which take place before the novel opens, reveal the pattern which is discernible in the two identities assumed by Mercy in the course of the story: the personæ imposed by others upon Mercy linger, whilst those she chooses for herself are fragile and of short duration. Although we glimpse Mercy in the role of nurse, it is not long before she has transformed herself into Grace Roseberry, and it is this so easily assumed incarnation which proves to be the hardest of all for her to maintain. Despite the fact that it is the German doctor, Ignatius Wetzel, who gives the seemingly dead Grace the name of Mercy Merrick, because that is the label he finds on a handkerchief in her possession, it is Mercy herself who claims to be Grace Roseberry, and who, with that one lie, sentences herself to a life of deceit and self-loathing. Andrew Lang, writing in the *Contemporary Review* in 1890, is quite wrong when he says that Mercy 'does not repent much of her imposture till she gets into an inextricable position.'<sup>30</sup> Her first instinct is to take Grace's place as Lady Janet's companion in an honourable manner:

What if she were to ask Lady Janet Roy to let her supply Miss Roseberry's place? [...] Suppose she ventured to plead her own cause—what would the noble and merciful lady do? She would write back, and say, 'Send me references to your

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<sup>30</sup> Lang, p. 22.

character, and I will see what can be done.' Her character! Her references! Mercy laughed bitterly. (*NM*, Ch. IV)

Even when she has apparently decided to carry out her duplicitous scheme:

Something jarred on her finer sense, something offended her better nature. [...] She had decided, and yet she was not at ease; she was not quite sure of having fairly questioned her conscience yet. What if she [...] put the contemplated project soberly on its trial before her own sense of right and wrong? (*NM*, Ch. IV)

Unfortunately, she is interrupted by the arrival of Horace Holmcroft, Ignatius Wetzell, and a German soldier. Before she has had time to consider her project further, she has pronounced herself to be 'Grace Roseberry'. Collins hastens to inform his reader that 'the words were hardly out of her mouth before she would have given everything she possessed in the world to recall them' (*NM*, Ch. V).

This remorse informs all of Mercy's subsequent actions. When we next meet her, at luncheon with Lady Janet, she is playing with her food rather than eating it. Collins tells of the affection felt by the older woman towards her 'adopted child', and the appreciation felt by the latter in return, but, he adds:

The gratitude of the beautiful companion has always the same restraint in its acknowledgement of kindness; the smile of the beautiful companion has always the same underlying sadness when it responds to Lady Janet's hearty laugh. Is there something wrong here, under the surface? Is she suffering in mind, or suffering in body? What is the matter with her?

The matter with her is secret remorse. The delicate and beautiful creature pines under the slow torment of constant self-reproach. (*NM*, Ch. VI)

As George Watt asserts, 'her alienation is such that she must continually turn within, shrinking into her own misery and loneliness.'<sup>31</sup> She has no one in whom she can confide, and the weight of her secret almost drives her insane. As with all of Collins's protagonists, she has human strengths and weaknesses, and the author delights in showing his reader the mental torment through which his protagonist's nobler and

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31 George Watt, p. 110.

baser instincts put her. Shortly before the real Grace Roseberry reappears, Lady Janet expresses the joy she feels at having Mercy as her companion:

For the moment, there was balm for [Mercy's] wounded spirit in the remembrance of those words. Grace Roseberry herself could surely have earned no sweeter praise than the praise that she had won. The next instant she was seized with a sudden horror of her own successful fraud. The sense of her degradation had never been so bitterly present to her as at that moment. If she could only confess the truth [...] what a grateful, happy woman she might be. (NM, Ch. VII)

This emotional inconsistency is also shown in her feelings towards Horace Homecroft, to whom she has rather rashly become engaged to be married:

Could she let the man who loved her—the man whom *she* loved—drift blindfold into marriage with such a woman as she had been? No! it was her duty to warn him. How? Could she break his heart, could she lay his life waste, by speaking the cruel words which might part them for ever? 'I won't tell him!' she burst out passionately. 'The disgrace of it would kill me!' (NM, Ch. VII)

Whilst an element of self-preservation is apparent in Mercy's actions, it is evident that Collins feels she is justified in her conduct. As George Watt observes, 'Mercy has captured the loyalty and heart of her creator.'<sup>32</sup> .

The second metamorphosis Mercy undergoes in the course of the novel is from impostor to honest penitent. Given that she is allowed to leave the novel as the wife of Julian Gray, we must accept that this incarnation is a permanent one. Although Mercy loves Julian—more, she realizes, than she ever loved Horace—and craves the respectability concomitant with the position of clergyman's wife, this is not a role which she seeks, or even accepts readily:

'Am *I* fit to be your wife?' she asked. 'Must *I* remind you of what you owe to your high position, your spotless integrity, your famous name? Think of all you have done for me, and then think of the black ingratitude of it if I ruin you for life by consenting to our marriage—if I selfishly, cruelly, wickedly, drag you down to the level of a woman like me?' (NM, Ch. XXIX)

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32 George Watt, p. 109.

Julian's response to this—'I raise you to *my* level when I make you my wife'—symbolizes the slow and often uncomfortable remoulding process through which he has, even before becoming aware of her existence, put her. During her first 'confession' to Grace Roseberry, Mercy reveals how a sermon delivered by the Reverend Gray had enabled her to accept her 'hard lot', and to begin to lead the life of a penitent woman (*NM*, Ch. II). Later, when she is masquerading as Grace and seeks his opinion as to the veracity of the real Grace's claim to that identity, it is the implicitness of Julian's trust in her which leads her into revealing more of her true self than she might otherwise have been persuaded to do. Speaking hypothetically of a woman who has 'deceived—basely deceived—innocent people who trusted her, [and] wronged—cruelly wronged—another woman' (*NM*, Ch. XVII), Mercy needs to know if Julian can see any hope for her. He assures her that given 'the opportunity she needs [...] our poor fallen fellow-creature may take her place again among the best of us; honoured, blameless, happy once more' (*NM*, Ch. XVII), provided that she admit her crimes:

'Let her own the truth,' answered Julian, 'without the base fear of discovery to drive her to it. Let her do justice to the woman whom she has wronged, while that woman is still powerless to expose her. Let her sacrifice everything that she has gained by the fraud to the sacred duty of atonement. If she can do that—for conscience' sake and for pity's sake—to her own prejudice, to her own shame, to her own loss—then her repentance has nobly revealed the noble nature that is in her; then she is a woman to be trusted, respected, beloved! If I saw the Pharisees and Fanatics of this lower earth passing by her in contempt, I would hold out my hand to her before them all. I would say to her in her solitude and her affliction, "Rise, poor wounded heart! Beautiful, purified soul, God's angels rejoice over you! Take your place among the noblest of God's creatures!"' (*NM*, Ch. XVII)<sup>33</sup>

As Jenny Taylor states, 'he transforms Mercy into absolute virtue by holding up an idealised image of herself for her to emulate.'<sup>34</sup> It is this 'idealised image' of herself

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<sup>33</sup> This speech is based around the parable of the lost sheep from Luke 15, and in particular verses 7 and 10. Curiously, the first of these verses resounds distortedly in Mercy's resentment of Horace's 'habitual glorification of the ladies of his family:'

'It sickens me,' she thought to herself, 'to hear the virtues of women who have never been tempted! Where is the merit of living reputably when your life is one course of prosperity and enjoyment?' (*NM*, Ch. VII).

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, 'Nineteenth-Century Psychology', p. 254.

which tempers Mercy's anger when, in one of the most decisive chapters in the novel, she is confronted by the vengeance-seeking Grace, who is impervious to her enemy's apologies and pleas for compassion. Nevertheless, Mercy attempts to be worthy of Julian's vision of her, and almost succeeds. Only when severely provoked by Grace's unceasing barrage of taunts and insults does she finally retaliate:

*'Who are you?'* [she asked.]

The suppressed fury of look and tone which accompanied that question told, as no violence could have told it, that the limits of Mercy's endurance had been found at last. In the guardian angel's absence, the evil genius had done its evil work. The better nature which Julian Gray had brought to life sank, poisoned by the vile venom of a woman's spiteful tongue. An easy and a terrible means of avenging the outrages heaped on her was within Mercy's reach if she chose to take it. In the frenzy of her indignation she never hesitated—she took it.

*'Who are you?'* she asked for the second time.

Grace roused herself and attempted to speak. Mercy stopped her with a scornful gesture of her hand.

*'I remember!'* she went on, with the same fiercely suppressed rage. *'You are the madwoman from the German hospital who came here a week ago. I'm not afraid of you this time. Sit down and rest yourself—Mercy Merrick.'* (NM, Ch. XIX)

Whilst this retaliation suggests that Julian's 'idealised image' may not yet have been fully emulated, Collins makes it clear that the reshaping process has most definitely begun, and, I would argue, Catherine Peters oversimplifies the situation when she states that 'when the real Grace Roseberry comes back to life, the usurper fights like a [*sic*] alley cat to keep her out of her rightful place.'<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Mercy does eventually relinquish her position in Lady Janet's house—much to the dismay of the old lady, who can forgive deceit but not ingratitude—and returns to a sacrificial life caring for homeless children in the Refuge she had hoped never to see again.

Her initial refusal to marry Julian Gray, then, is proof not of his failure to recreate her in the 'idealised image of herself', but of his success. The fact that she does accept him, after he has resigned his curacy, almost died from a fever caught working

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<sup>35</sup> Peters, pp. 339-40.



amongst the poor, and gained the contempt of the Horace Holmcrofts of the world, lends itself to two interpretations. On the one hand, these events could be argued to reveal that even one so morally elevated as Julian is, in the eyes of a prejudicial society at least, able to fall from grace, and thus, in this far from exalted position, become Mercy's husband without being selfishly, cruelly, wickedly, dragged down to the level of a woman like her. On the other hand, allowing a respectable man of the cloth to marry a reformed prostitute could more probably be seen as an example of Collins's subversive desire to save his heroine from the penitential death which would have been imposed upon her by his peers. He is, nevertheless, a realist. At the start of the novel, he has Mercy tell Grace:

'Society can subscribe to reclaim me—but Society can't take me back. You see me here in a place of trust—patiently, humble, doing all the good I can. It doesn't matter! Here, or elsewhere, what I *am* can never alter what I *was*. For three years past all that a sincerely penitent woman can do I have done. It doesn't matter! Once let my past story be known, and the shadow of it covers me; the kindest people shrink.' (NM, Ch. II)

It is on this note that the story ends. Mercy may have been remodelled and relabelled as the respectable Mrs Julian Gray, but for once Society bothers to look beyond superficial appearances, and, when Lady Janet gives a ball in honour of the young couple, Society attends, but keeps its impressionable young daughters well away from the contaminating influence which Mercy may bring to bear upon them. Realizing that reintegration is impossible in England, Mercy and Julian leave their homeland to try their luck in America. As George Watt observes, 'Collins knew his reform novel would not change society. Society is too nebulous, too unyielding, too morally inbred. He is content to see the change in Julian, Lady Janet Roy and, hopefully, in his reader.'<sup>36</sup>

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36 Watt, p. 117.

### III

Collins's other prostitute-heroine appears in *The Fallen Leaves*, in the form of a mentally retarded sixteen year old, known as Simple Sally. Like *The New Magdalen*, this novel ends with its heroine married to the man who saved her from her life of degradation, and with the hope of a better future in America before her. The heroines themselves, and the way in which Collins leads them to this ambivalent ending, are, however, very different.

In *The Fallen Leaves*, Simple Sally, born before her parents' marriage, is given away when a few hours old to a notorious baby-farmer, Mother Sowler, by her father, John Farnaby, who sees this action as a way of furthering his own interests in the business owned by his prospective father-in-law. Sally is raised by a variety of guardians, until eventually she is rescued from a particularly unpleasant individual whom she calls 'father', by the young American, Amelius Goldenheart. Amelius is a Primitive Christian Socialist who has been temporarily exiled from his religious community home—clearly a version of Robert Owen's 'New Harmony'—following a romantic misunderstanding with a woman twice his age.<sup>37</sup> In England, he becomes acquainted with Emma and John Farnaby, and their niece, Regina Mildmay, to whom he becomes engaged to be married. Emma Farnaby, however, is against this marriage because she wishes Amelius to remain unencumbered by a wife who would prevent him from scouring the world in search of her missing child. By the time Amelius discovers that he has already found the lost girl, Mrs Farnaby, deceived by an acquaintance of Mother Sowler, has taken a fatal draught. Mother and daughter are reunited on Emma Farnaby's deathbed. Amelius, who realizes that he loves Sally rather more than Regina, is released from his engagement by his fiancée, who realizes that she loves convention, money, and her uncle rather more than

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<sup>37</sup> See Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville, *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, (London: Macmillan, 1982), VI, pp. 205-14, and 'The New Moral World of Robert Owen and New Harmony', in *America's Communal Utopias*, ed. by Donald E. Pitzer (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 134-69.

Amelius. Sally marries her saviour, but whether or not they live happily ever after is a matter of conjecture—the promised sequel, *The Fallen Leaves: Second Series*, was never written—although, if Amelius's American friend, Rufus Dingwall's opinion is anything to go by, they are destined for a life of abject misery.

Throughout the novel, Collins stresses Sally's innocence. Unlike Mercy, she is unaware of her degradation, and accordingly is spared the internalized struggle between her sense of guilt and her sense of self-preservation. The dyadic nature of Sally's character is externalized, and we invariably perceive her through Amelius's eyes. Although he has been told of the existence of the missing child, he does not encounter her in person until half-way through the novel, when she accosts him with the 'catch-phrase' of the nineteenth-century prostitute, 'Are you good-natured, sir?'

He turned, and found himself face to face with one of the saddest sisterhood on earth—the sisterhood of the streets.

His heart ached as he looked at her, she was so poor and so young. The lost creature had, to all appearance, barely passed the boundary between childhood and girlhood—she could hardly be more than fifteen or sixteen years old. Her eyes, of the purest and loveliest blue, rested on Amelius with a vacantly patient look, like the eyes of a suffering child. The soft oval outline of her face would have been perfect if the cheeks had been filled out; they were wasted and hollow, and sadly pale. Her delicate lips had none of the rosy colour of youth; and her finely modelled chin was disfigured by a piece of plaster covering some injury. She was little and thin; her worn and scanty clothing showed her frail youthful figure still waiting for its perfection of growth. Her pretty little bare hands were reddened by the raw night air. She trembled as Amelius looked at her in silence, with compassionate wonder. But for the words in which she had accosted him, it would have been impossible to associate her with the lamentable life that she led. The appearance of the girl was artlessly virginal and innocent; she looked as if she had passed through the contamination of the streets without being touched by it, without fearing it, or feeling it, or understanding it. Robed in pure white, with her gentle blue eyes raised to heaven, a painter might have shown her on his canvas as a saint or an angel; and the critical world would have said, Here is the true ideal—Raphael himself might have painted this! <sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Fallen Leaves—First Series* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1879; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1994), Bk. 6, Ch. I.

From the first, then, Collins presents his reader with a split image of Sally: on the one hand she is debased, as her unhealthy pallor, her plastered, injured chin, and her obvious role in life combine to reveal; on the other, she is exalted, as her beautiful eyes, her virginal appearance, and her saintly potential all testify. Whilst there is a tendency to assume that the idea of Sally's 'worn and scanty clothing show[ing] her frail youthful figure' would have scandalized respectable middle-class Victorians, Collins's tone is, on the whole, not one which evokes a lascivious woman, but rather one which confers an ethereal quality on his subject. The early-twentieth-century concept of Victorian prudery as something which demanded that even table legs should be covered is one which has largely been disproved: Steven Marcus and others of his generation, writing during the sexually revolutionary 1960s, have suggested that the nineteenth-century attitude towards matters sexual involved an irresolvable conflict between puritanical repulsion and prurient attraction, whilst Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, has demonstrated that the idea of repressed Victorian sexuality is essentially fallacious.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Collins's verbal portrait of Sally is deliberately ambiguous—she is at once Madonna and Magdalen—and his use of language serves as much to highlight the difference between the two sides to her character as it does to fuse them. The brother of a Royal Academician, Collins would have been aware of the contemporary growth of interest in the discipline of life study. Nevertheless, the nude form was invariably edited when it came to the depiction of genitalia and body hair, and drapes were often added, partly to avoid the problem of misrepresentation, and partly to offset the form and contours of the figure. According to Alison Smith, 'while some observers thought this addition more discreet, others objected that transparent or clinging drapery only served to encourage a prurient interest in the underlying

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<sup>39</sup> See Marcus, and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1984).

F. Barry Smith, in his essay 'Sexuality in Britain, 1800-1900', also rejects the idea of repressive Victorian sexuality, although he takes issue with what he perceives as Marcus's over reliance on the works of William Acton and *My Secret Life*, accusing him of 'turning exegesis into historical evidence' (*A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 182-98 (p. 185)).

naked figure.’<sup>40</sup> What underlies Sally’s clinging drapery, however, is as underdeveloped as her mental capabilities. As we soon learn from one of the older prostitutes who seems to look after Sally, “‘she’s a little soft, poor soul—hasn’t grown up, you know, in her mind, since she was a child’” (*FL*, Bk. 6, Ch. 1). Her intellectual, emotional, and physical development have all been stunted by the hardships she has endured, and she remains, for the majority of her time in the novel at least, little more than the lost child she appears to be in this scene.

Just as the perception of the nurse was one of some ambivalence in Victorian times, the figure of the child in general, and the girl child in particular, was in itself a source of anxiety. Whilst eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thought—informed by the philosophies expounded by John Locke in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Jean Jacques Rousseau in *Emile, or, On Education* (1762)—enveloped her in romantic imagery, associating her with all that is artless and natural, Victorian evangelicalism, influenced by an older Calvinistic view, demanded that the child be seen as inherently wicked and in need of restraint.<sup>41</sup> Whereas the followers of Locke and Rousseau maintained that childhood should be a time of innocent discovery and simple pleasures, rather than a training ground for adulthood or for the admittance to heaven, the majority of scientific and pseudo-scientific writings dealing with the subject of the adolescent female put forward the idea of the young girl as a highly sexualized being.

These dichotomous perceptions of natural innocence and wicked sexuality gave rise to two powerful but opposed representations of the child. As Deborah Gorham has argued, ‘the two familiar images of adult women, the angel-in-the-house and the fallen woman, have their counterparts in the opposing images of the child redeemer and the wayward,

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<sup>40</sup> Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality, and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> John Locke *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693; repr. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or, On Education* (1762; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991). See also Donna E. Norton, *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children’s Literature* (Columbus, Oh.: Prentice Hall, 1995), pp. 62-67.

evil girl.'<sup>42</sup> It is these opposing images of the child that Collins conflates and explores in *The Fallen Leaves*.

Fear of the second of these representations, coupled with, as Pearsall demonstrates, the frightening extent to which children were looked upon as direct sexual objects, no doubt informed much of the dominant thinking on the education of children in middle-class homes.<sup>43</sup> Mothers were expected to protect their daughters from any dangerous knowledge by restricting their circle of acquaintances and schooling them in sexual repression. After all, girls grew into women, and as W. R. Greg, observed in his *Westminster Review* article, 'Prostitution':

If the passions of women were ready, strong, and spontaneous, in a degree even remotely approaching the form they assume in the coarser sex, there can be little doubt that sexual irregularities would reach a height, of which, at present, we have happily no conception.<sup>44</sup>

The girls themselves were exhorted by the authors of the many handbooks on etiquette written especially for them to adhere unquestioningly to societal norms and parental decrees. One such author, a Mrs L. Heaton Armstrong was so anxious to remain within the limits of propriety that her advice to her young readers must surely have mystified rather than clarified the dangers at which she so archly hinted. The young girl, she proclaims,

[...] should not avow a preference for the society of gentlemen, or look bored in the company of her own sex. She should not behave in public so as to attract attention, or be seen eternally walking up and down any public promenade. She

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<sup>42</sup> Deborah Gorham, 'The "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" Re-examined: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late-Victorian England', *Victorian Studies*, 21 (1978), 353-79 (p. 370).

<sup>43</sup> Pearsall, p. 350. This entire chapter, 'The Cult of the Little Girl' (pp. 350-63), is of particular interest with regard to the sexual positioning of the virginal young girl within Victorian society in general, and within semi-pornographic literature in particular.

<sup>44</sup> W. R. Greg, 'Prostitution', *Westminster Review*, 53 (1850), 448-506 (p. 457).

should not make herself conspicuous to any one admirer, or flaunt her flirtations in the face of the world.<sup>45</sup>

Indulging in such bad habits would, Mrs Heaton Armstrong warns, cause the world to conclude, not that the girl in question is a prostitute plying her trade, but that she has 'bad style'. The author further advocates self-restraint as 'requisite for success in society,' since:

A good reputation can never be preserved by those who only consider the pleasure of the moment. If we are to live in the world we must abide by its rules [some of which] no one may transgress with impunity. A girl will do well to be guided by the advice of a good and gentle mother, so that if she is sometimes advised to renounce something which she would have liked she may feel content to give it up, even if she does not quite understand the reason.<sup>46</sup>

Innocence, and along with it, ignorance of all things sexual or worldly, was, then, thought to be a prerequisite of genteel femininity. According to Josephine Butler, 'A pure woman, it was reiterated [in her youth], should be absolutely ignorant of a certain class of evils in the world. [...] Silence was thought to be the great duty on all such subjects.'<sup>47</sup>

Whilst *The New Magdalen* was not as great a success as many of Collins's other novels, it was not met with the disapprobation which greeted *The Fallen Leaves*, as its heroine could at least be criticized for her deliberate imposture, and her awareness of her own degradation. Victorian readers, loath to condone the actions of a woman such as Mercy, could, in the case of *The New Magdalen*, like the book without liking its heroine, whom they were able to blame for her own immorality. In *The Fallen Leaves*, such condemnation was more difficult: how could Sally, with her constantly reiterated innocence and purity, be reviled for immorality? Any favourable comment on the novel must, by extension, be a favourable comment on its heroine. Openly criticized as

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45 Mrs L. Heaton Armstrong, *Etiquette for Girls* (London and New York: Frederick Warne and Co., [n. d.]), pp. 6-7.

46 Armstrong, pp. 7-8.

47 *Recollections of George Butler*, quoted in Murray, p. 139.

'unwholesome' and lacking in 'delicacy of treatment',<sup>48</sup> the later novel no doubt provoked a considerable amount of more covert discomfort because of its mockery and subversion of the Victorian ideology of female innocence. By draping Sally in what Robert Ashley calls 'a virginal aura which the fully matured Mercy could not conceivably possess,'<sup>49</sup> Collins at once absolves her of her sins, committed in ignorance that they were sinful, and parodies the unworldly maidens so desired by respectable society. Sally may have lacked 'a good and gentle mother' to advise her, she may be untutored in the art of self restraint, and she is definitely guilty of spontaneity and the much feared 'bad style', but she remains as pure in mind and as innocent in spirit as any over-protected middle-class virgin.

Philanthropists and reformers in the nineteenth century frequently wished to point out, as does Collins, that the prostitute was rarely vicious and degenerate by nature. George Gissing, in his life as well as in his fiction, was another fervent advocate of this belief, and William Acton, in his 1870 work, *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*, attempted to persuade his readers that the prostitute was not some fearsome and alien creature, doomed to die an early and disgraceful death, but a fellow human being, who would succumb 'not to [her] calling, nor to venereal disease, but in due time, and to the various maladies common to respectable humanity.'<sup>50</sup> Indeed, even—or, perhaps, especially—innocent girls were more at risk than those who were depraved. Trevor Fisher quotes a French detective who, in 1859, commented that 'The education of English girls is usually of such a strictly prudish character that, in their simplicity and ignorance of the world, they offer themselves the easiest prey imaginable.'<sup>51</sup> The reason for this is given by Greg:

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48 Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 48 (1879), 148-49; quoted in Page, pp. 205-06.

49 Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 114.

50 Quoted in Marcus, p. 5.

51 Fisher, p. 44.



They yield to the desires in which they do not share, from a weak generosity which cannot refuse anything to the passionate entreaties of the man they love. There is in the warm fond heart of woman a strange and sublime unselfishness, which men too commonly discover only to profit by—a positive love of self-sacrifice—an active, so to speak, an *aggressive* desire to show their affection, by giving up to those who have won it something they hold very dear.<sup>52</sup>

Certainly there is something 'aggressive' in Sally's desire to show her affection for Amelius. Having escaped from the Refuge where Rufus and Amelius had left her, Sally makes her way to Amelius's cottage, and persuades Amelius's manservant to grant her admittance. Amelius encounters her in his bedroom, where he has been thinking of his homeland, his friends, and his pet animals:

In his unendurable loneliness, he had longed for his dog, he had longed for his fawn. [Suddenly], there was the martyred creature from the streets, whom he had rescued from nameless horror, waiting to be his companion, servant, friend! There was the child-victim of cold and hunger, still only feeling her way to womanhood; innocent of all other aspirations, so long as she might fill the place which had once been occupied by the dog and the fawn. (*FL*, Bk. 7, Ch. II)

Despite attempts to disculpate the prostitute for her fall, the common assumption was that once she had fallen, redemption was impossible. The corrupting effect of illicit sexual liaisons was thought to be ineradicable. According to the statement of a police court missionary, 'I see some young in years who have already come to the wayside of life, for their bones are full of sin.'<sup>53</sup> A lock hospital employee, quoted in W. T. Stead's 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', likewise observed that 'the innocent girl[s] once outraged seemed to suffer a lasting blight of the moral sense. They never came to any good; the foul passion of the man seemed to enter into the helpless victim of his lust.'<sup>54</sup> Although Henry Mayhew was contemptuous of what he called the 'foolish idea [...] which still lingers in the minds of both men and women that the harlot's progress

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52 W. R. Greg, 'Prostitution', p. 459.

53 Quoted in Thomas Holmes, *Pictures and Problems from London Police Courts* (London: Edward Arnold, 1900), p. 25.

54 W. T. Stead, 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', *Pall Mall Gazette*, (6, 7, 8, and 10 July, 1885); quoted in Gorham, pp. 371-72.

is short and rapid, and that there is no possible advance, moral or physical,'<sup>55</sup> the majority of respectable Victorians were not so liberal, and, as Eric Trudgill observes,

[...] many Victorians were convinced that the typical prostitute, far from the image in sentimental novels as the poor, wretched wanderer of the night, was in reality positively revelling in a life of carefree sin, idleness and luxurious dissipation.<sup>56</sup>

Both Walkowitz and Mason, two of the most modern, and certainly the standard authorities on prostitution in the nineteenth century, whilst making no direct reference to Collins's views, stress that the contemporary reaction to this painful subject was by no means uniform or consistent, since issues of class, gender, and religion confused the issue. Compassionate women like Josephine Butler found themselves allied to less enlightened and more repressive thinkers. Dickens was an unlikely companion to Angela Burdett Coutts, and neither was very sympathetic towards the prostitutes in their care. As Mason shows, Victorian prejudice was not so widespread as to forbid any mention of the subject—indeed, Victorian novelists were much more likely to place prostitutes in central positions in their novels than are their modern counterparts—but it did lead to some curiously muddled thinking, and was backed up by considerable medical ignorance and bigotry. Collins's portrait of two fallen women capable of reform would have perturbed most, but not all, strands of Victorian opinion, although such strands would have found it difficult to state exactly where he went wrong. As I have illustrated, although there was some hostile criticism of the subject matter of *The Fallen Leaves* and *The New Magdalen*, the books continued to sell well. It seems more likely that many modern estimates of Collins's novels have relied on a too facile and monolithic approach to Victorian attitudes.

In *The Fallen Leaves*, Collins shows that a harlot may indeed make progress, both moral and physical. Not for nothing did he liken Sally to a Renaissance painting, thus evoking

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<sup>55</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: Those That Will Not Work* (London: Frank Cass, 1862), IV, p. 209.

<sup>56</sup> Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976), p. 102.

the concept of Renaissance Man (or in this case, Woman), the 'complete human being', conversant in all branches of learning, and master of his own thoughts and destiny. Having rescued Sally from Hell-fire, the pimp whom she addresses as 'father', Amelius immediately sets about Sally's reformation and education. His first step is to buy her some new clothes, an offer which he makes 'in the tone in which he might have promised a new toy to a child' (*FL*, Bk. 6, Ch. II). Influenced by Rufus, however, the process is interrupted, and Sally is found a place in an institution dedicated to the redemption of fallen women. Although Amelius thinks of her 'not as the poor, starved, degraded, half-witted creature of the streets, but as the grateful girl who had asked for no happier future than to be his servant' (*FL*, Bk. 6, Ch. IV), she is still a child to him: 'He happened to recollect her artless blue eyes, with their vague patient look, and her quaint childish questions put so openly in so sweet a voice—and that was all' (*FL*, Bk. 6, Ch. VI). I would disagree with Phillip O'Neill when he says that, at this point in the novel, 'Goldenheart's desire for this angel with her childish questions is not altogether honourable.'<sup>57</sup> It is only later, when he hears from the Matron of the Refuge that Sally is 'brightening mentally and physically' (*FL*, Bk. 7, Ch. I), that he begins, albeit with self-loathing, to consider Sally in the same way that he considers his fiancée:

He was as firmly convinced, as if he had been the strictest moralist living, that it was an insult to Regina, and an insult to his own self-respect, to set the lost creature whom he had rescued in any light of comparison with the young lady who was one day to be his wife. And yet, try as he might to drive her out, Sally kept her place in his thoughts. There was, apparently, some innate depravity in him. (*FL*, Bk. 7, Ch. I)

After Sally has escaped from the Refuge she begins to exert a more definite sexual influence over Amelius. Afraid of being scolded for running away,

She cast one doubtful look at [Amelius], and hung her head. [...] Amelius lost all control over himself. He took her in his arms and kissed her again and again. 'You are a dear good grateful little creature!' he burst out—and suddenly stopped, aware too late of the act of imprudence which he had committed. (*FL*, Bk. 7, Ch. II)

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<sup>57</sup> O'Neill, p. 66.

They are, however, able to put this behind them, and Amelius undertakes the task of stimulating Sally's intellectual faculties. Gradually they settle down to a loving but platonic coexistence:

They parted with a kiss at night, and they met again with a kiss in the morning—and they were as happily free from all mistrust of the future as a pair of birds. [...]

But the lessons went on; and the teacher and pupil were as inconsiderately happy as ever in each other's society. Observing with inexhaustible interest the progress of the mental development of Sally, Amelius was slow to perceive the physical development which was unobtrusively keeping pace with it. (*FL*, Bk. 8, Ch. V)

Thus far, Sally has not been a truly sexual being. When we first see her, she is what Walkowitz would describe as 'simply a pathetic embodiment of social injustice,'<sup>58</sup> and one of the book's greatest triumphs is its tracing of Sally's development from sexually active naïveté to sexually attractive sophistication. As we have already seen, even when Collins describes her in the act of soliciting a man for sex, his choice of language does little to suggest prurient sexuality. Indeed, he almost appears to be implying that her fallen state served to protect her virtue and innocence, and that the further she distances herself from the undesirable elements of her previous life, the further she distances herself from those elements of it which were so coveted by respectable society. As Roland Barthes observes in his essay, 'Striptease', 'woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked,' and what is revealed at the end of the performance is 'nakedness as a *natural* vesture of woman, which amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste state of the flesh.'<sup>59</sup> Whilst Sally is never literally 'stripped naked', she is desexualized until such time as she becomes aware of her condition and takes steps to alter it. It is Sally the unregenerate prostitute, then, who is the epitome of asexual womanhood, whereas it is Sally the Renaissance Woman who shows

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<sup>58</sup> *Prostitution*, p. 13.

<sup>59</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 84-87 (pp. 84, 85).

disturbingly provocative characteristics and whose sexual charms are infinitely more dangerous to the innocent Amelius:

Sally crossed the room before he could rise from his chair; her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were bright, her hair fell loose over her shoulders—she dropped at his feet, and hid her face on his knees. ‘I’m an ungrateful wretch!’ she burst out; ‘I never kissed you when I said goodnight.’ [...] She jumped up, and sat on his knee, and put her arms around his neck. ‘I was too miserable to go to sleep. I don’t know what’s been the matter with me today. I seem to be losing the little sense I ever had. Oh, if I could only make you understand how fond I am of you! And yet I’ve had bitter thoughts, as if I was a burden to you and I had done a wrong thing in coming here—and you would have told me so, only you pitied the poor wretch who had nowhere else to go.’ She tightened her hold around his neck, and laid her burning cheek against his face. ‘Oh, Amelius, my heart is sore! Kiss me, and say “Goodnight Sally!”’

He was young—he was a man—for a moment he lost his self-control; he kissed her as he had never kissed her yet. (*FL*, Bk. 8, Ch. VI)

The overtly sexual Sally has also developed a consciousness of her quondam degradation—“Is the mark of the streets on me, after all you have done to rub it out?” she asks Amelius (*FL*, Bk. 8, Ch. VI)—and of the obstacle she feels she must represent to Amelius’s plans for the future. “I *am* a different girl,” she states. “I think of things that I never thought of before—some change, I don’t know what, has come over me” (*FL*, Bk. 8, Ch. VIII). The change is maturity: Sally has grown up, physically, intellectually, and emotionally. From, to use Freud’s terminology, the polymorphously perverse child whose psychological development had been arrested for so many years by the circumstances in which she found herself, Sally has passed, metaphorically, through latency and puberty with startling rapidity, and finally blossomed into a state of true womanhood. Prompted by this new sense of awareness, she feels that she cannot continue to live under the same roof as Amelius when neither of them believes in the myth of siblinghood which they are enacting. By leaving Amelius and returning to the streets, she atones for, rather than compounds, the sins she has only recently realized she has committed, and, thus cleansed, is able to marry her benefactor.

## IV

As I have already indicated in *The Evil Genius*, one woman's fall can affect all those around her. In *The New Magdalen* and *The Fallen Leaves*, it is less the fall itself than the association—either direct or indirect—with the fallen which has such devastating results upon women who previously have been of impeccably good character. Mercy Merrick and Simple Sally are intrinsically noble characters despite their ignoble pasts, and Collins certainly wished his readers' sympathy to be with them. Reynolds and Humble assert that, although they have:

[...] no difficulty in finding symbolic and narrative encodings of sexuality in association with 'pure' women, we find great difficulty in reading the novel's representations of prostitutes as anything other than punitive. [...] The prostitute in most novels of the period is less an individual in her own right than a marker of the limits of the socially tolerable.<sup>60</sup>

In both his novels about prostitutes, Collins's attitude is evidently at odds with this view. His prostitutes, as we have seen, are very much individuals in their own right, whilst his representations of 'pure' women can only be construed as 'punitive'. Indeed, the full significance of the lives of Collins's fallen women can only be fully appreciated when juxtaposed against those of his more conservative characters. In each of the two novels, in addition to the debased heroine, there is another claimant for the readers' indulgence—in the form of Lady Janet Roy and Emma Farnaby—as well as a third protagonist—in the form of Grace Roseberry and Regina Mildmay—worthy only of the readers' contempt.

Lady Janet Roy is the septuagenarian society hostess who has offered employment to the recently orphaned Grace Roseberry, a woman she knows only as the daughter of a distant relative. Collins introduces her ladyship with a passage of panegyric:

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<sup>60</sup> Reynolds and Humble, pp. 46-47.

Who has not heard of her old lace and her priceless rubies? Who has not admired her commanding figure, her beautifully-dressed white hair, her wonderful black eyes, which still preserve their youthful brightness, after first opening on the world seventy years since? Who has not felt the charm of her frank easily-flowing talk, her inexhaustible spirits, her good-humoured gracious sociability of manner? Where is the modern hermit who is not familiarly acquainted, by hearsay at least, with the fantastic novelty and humour of her opinions; with her generous encouragement of rising merit of any sort, in all ranks, high or low; with her charities, which know no distinction between abroad and at home; with her large indulgence, which no ingratitude can discourage and no servility pervert? (NM, Ch. VI)

Whilst her family might not be quite so well-established as Horace Holmcroft's, she is noble both by birth and by behaviour. Likened by Barbara Leavy to a 'fairy godmother, a fictional embodiment of the ideal mother, who protects her daughter from all harm and fulfills all her desires,' Lady Janet is the antithesis of the suspicious, resentful foster-mother of Mercy's adolescence.<sup>61</sup> She welcomes Mercy into her home as a companion, and almost immediately begins to regard her as the child she has never had. When the real Grace reappears, Lady Janet is initially hostile to the newcomer, until she realizes that there may be some truth in what she professes. Rather than expel Mercy, whom she loves for her good qualities, not for her name, she offers Grace five hundred pounds to return to Canada and trouble them no more. She is aware that such conduct is below her dignity, but she feels that her love for her adopted child merits any sacrifice: "Oh, my love!" she murmured, "how low I have stooped, how miserably I have degraded myself—and all for You!" (NM, Ch. XXIII).

When Mercy ignores her injunctions to maintain the deception, Lady Janet is justifiably hurt and offended, feeling she has debased herself for no reason. However, 'her large indulgence, which no ingratitude can discourage' (NM, Ch. VI), is stronger than her sense of injury, and she soon decides to visit Mercy in the Refuge where she is now employed. That one of so noble lineage as Lady Janet should not only visit an ex-

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<sup>61</sup> Barbara Fass Leavy, 'Wilkie Collins' *The New Magdalen* and the Folklore of the Kind and the Unkind Girls', in *Wilkie Collins to the Forefront: Some Reassessments*, ed. by Nelson Smith and R. C. Terry (New York: AMS Press, 1995), pp. 209-225 (p. 215).

prostitute in such an establishment, but that she should also 'plead her nephew's cause as humble suitor for the hand of Mercy Merrick' (NM, Epilogue, Ch. I), is interpreted by Horace and Grace as proof of 'the decay of the faculties with advancing age' (NM, Epilogue, Ch. I). Her decision to stand by Julian and Mercy, even to the extent of arranging a ball in their honour, no doubt compounds her senility in the eyes of society. By her association with Mercy Merrick, the great lady has been brought low: she, too, has 'fallen'. As Mercy and her new husband set sail for a new life in America, Lady Janet is abandoned to a lonely old age. It is not without feeling that Collins has Julian Gray confess to his diary: 'The one sorrow I shall carry away with me from the shores of England will be the sorrow of parting with dear warm-hearted Lady Janet. At her age it is a parting for life' (NM, Epilogue, Ch. IV).

Grace Roseberry, who makes no attempt to deceive, impersonate, or in any way prevent the truth from being told is the one who should receive the reader's sympathy. Indeed, the *Athenaeum* regarded Grace as 'the representative of virtue' in the story, and R. Beaton, after grudgingly conceding that she, along with Horace Holmcroft, may be 'representative of [...] hypocritical and unforgiving society,' states defensively that 'Grace is the victim, first of the German shell attack, and then of Mercy's personation of her; as an unwitting victim she invites pity and sympathy.'<sup>62</sup> Certainly Grace has been wronged—her clothes, her papers, and even her name and identity are taken from her—but from the moment her 'victimization' begins, she loses all claim to the reader's 'pity and sympathy'.

Grace enters the novel shortly after the majestic Mercy, and although she is:

[...] darker in complexion and smaller in stature, [she] possessed attractions which were quite marked enough to account for the surgeon's polite anxiety to shelter her in the captain's room. The common consent of mankind would have declared her to be an unusually pretty woman. She wore the large grey cloak that covered her from head to foot with a grace that lent its own attractions to a plain and even shabby article of dress. The languor of her movements, and the

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<sup>62</sup> Unsigned review of the theatrical version of *The New Magdalen*, 'Drama: The Week', *Athenaeum*, 2378 (1873), 674; Beaton, p. 65.



uncertainty of tone in her voice, as she thanked the surgeon, suggested that she was suffering from fatigue. Her dark eyes searched the dimly-lighted room timidly, and she held fast by the nurse's arm with the air of a woman whose nerves had been severely shaken by some recent alarm. (*NM*, Ch. I)<sup>63</sup>

Collins does not describe her in such precise detail as he does Mercy. Nevertheless, we are left in no doubt that she is beautiful, albeit in the conventional sense represented by 'the common consent of mankind'. As George Watt observes, 'any reader of Collins would realise that the power of "common consent" is neither to be trusted nor admired.'<sup>64</sup> Any illusions that we may be harbouring as to the depth of this beauty are, however, soon dispelled. Although she responds to Mercy's inquiry about her own life-story 'cordially' and 'unaffectedly' (*NM*, Ch. I), her disdainful reaction to her companion's autobiographical recital—'Grace considered—advanced a step towards her—stopped—and took refuge in the most trivial of all commonplace phrases which one human being can address to another' (*NM*, Ch. II)—reveals that, despite '[her] unblemished character, and [her] prospect of being established honourably in a respectable house' (*NM*, Ch. I), she is mean-spirited and vindictive.

Grace, even at this early stage, has already revealed herself to be not only a snob, but a social-climber. Her apparent gratitude towards Mercy who has shown such 'sisterly kindness to a stranger' (*NM*, Ch. I), is not, as she claims, prompted by the fact that it was Mercy who came to her rescue when she was stranded with no money or luggage in a war zone. Rather, it is prompted by her mistaken belief that Mercy is 'some great lady in disguise' (*NM*, Ch. I), and she is positively aggressive in her determination to become the friend of the woman she regards as her social superior. She can see no reason why a disguised noblewoman should object to such a relationship with a homeless, helpless, friendless woman of limited education, who has only her good name to speak for her, and yet when the true situation becomes known to her, she is incapable of making

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<sup>63</sup> Not content with renaming Collins's characters (see p. 92 above), Sue Lonoff also feels it incumbent upon her to alter their physical features to suit her own theories: the dark-skinned, dark-eyed Grace Roseberry she cites as an example of Collins's tendency to portray villainesses as 'fair and feminine' (p. 91).

<sup>64</sup> George Watt, p. 109.

towards Mercy the same gesture of condescension that she expected Mercy to make towards her. Essentially *arriviste*, Grace is the personification of the middle classes, who, according to Ronald Pearsall,

[...] modeled their behavior and thought processes on those of the upper classes, or what they thought was the behavior and thought processes of the upper classes. The middle classes were mistaken; the upper classes did not give a damn about conventional morality.<sup>65</sup>

This aristocratic contempt for orthodoxy, of course, goes some way towards explaining Lady Janet's acceptance of Mercy despite her past, and Grace's rejection of her because of it. Ironically, the middle classes were not the only group to mimic the upper classes. As Walkowitz comments, 'In their dress, prostitutes emulated the conspicuous display of Victorian ladies,' although 'this effort to ape ladies was usually lost on self-righteous middle-class observers' who considered the streetwalkers to be 'outrageous' in dress and 'revolting' in language and manners.<sup>66</sup> In this, too, the distinction between Grace and Mercy is once again blurred.

Aware of Grace's self-interest and prejudices, we are not unduly distressed when she is hit, and apparently killed, by a German shell. She may be, as R. Beaton chooses to put it, 'an unwitting victim' of the attack, but she is certainly not an undeserving one, for it is she who pointedly ignores the French surgeon's warning to 'beware of opening the shutter, for fear of the light being seen through the window' (*NM*, Ch. I), and thus draws the enemy's fire, endangering not merely her own life, but those of all at the hospital.

From Grace's point of view, no doubt, these hospital workers and patients are of little consequence, as they surely cannot bear such an illustrious name as she believes 'Roseberry' to be. It is, then, only fitting that one who sets so much store by her identity and lineage, and so little by the lives and well-being of her fellow men, should be deprived of the two things she values above all others—her name and her social

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<sup>65</sup> Pearsall, p. xi.

<sup>66</sup> *Prostitution*, p. 26.

prospects. Grace may be theoretically right when she attacks Mercy for usurping her position at Mablethorpe House, but Collins, with his love of manipulating his readers' sense of right and wrong, makes us doubt whether she is morally justified. The language he uses throughout the novel to refer to Grace contrasts sharply with that which he uses to describe Mercy's inherent nobility. Grace is guilty of 'vindictive delight', 'savage triumph', and 'greedy eagerness', and she possesses 'viperish eyes', a 'sharp tongue', and an 'impenetrably hard and narrow mind' (NM, Chs. XI, XX, XXIII). It is she, more than Mercy, who fights like Catherine Peters's 'alley cat' to regain her place in Lady Janet's house, and with it, in society. She has no doubt about who she is, but unless she can persuade others to accept her, her noble lineage means nothing. She fails to oust Mercy, and has to be content instead to return with her sordidly acquired 'hush-money' to Canada, and a position as a lowly companion.

Deprived of the recognition she feels she deserves, even though her claims to nobility are somewhat tenuous—her father was related to Lady Janet by marriage rather than by blood—Grace has been reduced to the status of a nobody. Just as Lady Janet's association with Mercy Merrick caused her to degrade herself in her own eyes, so Grace's association with Mercy has brought about her fall.

The novel does not end on a completely negative note for Grace, however. She has encountered in Horace Holmcroft a soulmate, who appreciates the dubious importance of belonging to a family which, he somewhat ludicrously claims, can be traced back to both the Saxons (on his father's side) and the Normans (on his mother's). Having rejected Mercy when he discovered that her 'pedigree' was not all it could be, he is able to transfer his tawdry affections to Grace, once she has resumed her name, and the Epilogue suggests that by becoming her husband, he may be the means of enabling her to return from Canada and regain her lost place in society.

Amelius Goldenheart's betrothed wife, Regina, in *The Fallen Leaves* also loses her standing in the eyes of the world when her beloved uncle's dubious financial speculations result in his ruin. Throughout the novel she has shown greater concern for

society's opinion than for truth, and her eventual downfall is a fitting punishment for her narrow-mindedness.

Almost as soon as he arrives in England, Amelius finds himself infatuated by Regina, whom he meets at a dinner party given by her uncle, John Farnaby. Although Farnaby describes his niece in glowing terms, which may predispose the reader towards Regina in the early stages of the novel, it is worth remembering that this is the same Farnaby who perfidiously gave his own new-born daughter away to a baby-farmer in order to secure his position in his future father-in-law's business, and his opinion may not be the most reliable. Far from being the "simple, unaffected, kind-hearted creature" (*FL*, Bk. 2, Ch. I) of her uncle's devious imagination, Regina is calculating, haughty, and self-obsessed. Despite Emma Farnaby's warning to Amelius that her niece is "as cold as ice," and will "trifle with you as long as it flatters her vanity; and [...] throw you over, as she has thrown other men over" (*FL*, Bk. 3, Ch. III), the knowledge that Emma has a vested interest in Amelius's remaining a bachelor rather lessens the impact of her words. Unfortunately for her niece's young suitor, Emma is right, although Regina's coldness and her vanity do not stem so much from wickedness as much as from her rigid and unquestioning adherence to what she believes to represent good breeding. As Roger Dennis observes, 'Regina is not a villainess; she is a weak person designed to represent the shallowness of polite society and its mores.'<sup>67</sup>

The last of the fallen women connected with Simple Sally is Emma Farnaby, Sally's natural mother. Just as Collins showed his readers in *Heart and Science* that the hallowed idol of motherhood could very easily have feet of clay, he once more reveals a darker, more sullied side of maternal affection than many of his contemporaries would have chosen to acknowledge. Although the child Sally cannot be held responsible for her mother's fall, her disappearance has blighted Emma's life as much as any 'mark of the streets' could have done. Emma originally epitomizes the Victorian ideal of feminine beauty, being 'plump and short, with large blue eyes, and full pouting lips,

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<sup>67</sup> Dennis, p. 282.

and splendid yellow hair' (*FL*, Prologue), but her anguish at losing her child has defeminized her: she now smokes cigars and lifts dumb-bells in an attempt to assuage her grief.

In Regina Mildmay, Collins clearly attacks the Victorian belief that what appears correct is correct. In Emma Farnaby, he goes one step further. Obviously not the idealized domestic angel parodied in Regina, Emma is, nevertheless, a reduplication of her niece. She too has allowed herself and her actions to be dominated by John Farnaby; she too has yielded to the dictates of propriety, keeping her child's existence secret from polite society, and endeavouring only in the most furtive and clandestine ways to find her. Treated with contempt by her husband, whom she suspects of having had some involvement in her daughter's disappearance, and deprived of the female right to motherhood, she, like Grace Roseberry, is a nobody, unable to forge an identity from the shambles of her life. Her final act of suicide, committed in her maiden name of Ronald, coupled with her death-bed reunion with her lost child, allow her to die as she had been unable to live: a mother with an untarnished identity.



It will be apparent from this account of these three novels that what might be regarded as conventionally good turns out to be bad, and vice versa. There is no absolute black or white in Collins's philosophy, and although in his mid-period novels he went some way towards exploring many of the intervening grey areas, it is in the later novels, with their unexpected reversals and provocative standpoints, that he concentrates most explicitly on these ambiguities. Whilst many of his contemporaries who chose to place fallen women at the centre of their narratives felt obliged to adhere to convention and contain any subversive elements such figures may have connoted, Collins's standpoint was firm: unconventional behaviour is no more immoral and destructive than

conventional attitudes are ethical and productive.<sup>68</sup> Discussing Ouida's books, Sally Mitchell mentions briefly that, in Collins's novels, 'virtually every unchaste heroine who is a heroine is essentially pure. She has either been victimized by society or has deliberately sacrificed herself to save the man she loves from debauchery and ruin.'<sup>69</sup> The problems she encounters are clearly shown, not to stem from her own moral turpitude, but to be the fault of a critical and uncomprehending society. His chaste villainesses—and Catherine Linley is an exception here—are revealed to be cold, self-seeking, and every bit as subversive as their fallen sisters. By allowing his fallen women to make decent, loving marriages whilst at the same time sentencing his respectable ones, at best, to marriages of convenience, and, at worst, to lonely spinsterhood, Collins once again turns convention on its head, although it is perhaps worth observing that the concept of a prostitute settling down to a life of wedded bliss was not something found only in the fiction of the day: whilst the 'magdalenists' saw the prostitute's career as a sharp descent into crime, disease, and untimely death, William Acton and his disciples maintained that for many, prostitution was just a temporary expedient, and one which many were able to set aside without any long-term ill effects.<sup>70</sup>

The three novels discussed above, then, are interesting not only because they show that Collins believed whole-heartedly in the possible redemption of the fallen woman, but also because of the increase in antagonism between the sexually- and the socially-active women who are their protagonists. In creating this dynamic, Collins is able both to attack the attitudes of the latter in society, and to question the apparent endorsement of such attitudes in the contemporary novel; what is also clear is his genuine interest in

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68 Patricia Frick, however, in her article 'The Fallen Angels of Wilkie Collins', chooses to interpret the fact that the novels end with the marriages (or, in the case of *The Evil Genius*, the suggested marriage) of the fallen women as indicative of a more orthodox closure (*International Journal of Women's Studies*, 7 (1984), 343-51),

69 Mitchell, p. 142. The exception she makes to this generalization is Anne Silvester in *Man and Wife*.

70 See Mason, p. 83.

attempting to analyse the form and function of frequently tabooed female sexuality. As Robert Ashley observes:

In his recognition of the unjust restrictions imposed on women by Victorian society, his sympathy for the fallen woman, and his audacity in creating women with minds of their own as well as strong physical charm, Collins was ahead of his time.<sup>71</sup>



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<sup>71</sup> Ashley, 'Wilkie Collins Reconsidered', p.271.

## Chapter Three

### WICKED CREATURES



‘There is no such creature as a perfectly consistent human being on the face of the earth. [...] Our good English readers are charmed with the man, the woman, or the child, who is introduced to them by the kind novelist as being without faults. Do they stop to consider whether this is a true picture of humanity? [...] I am not trying to dishearten you; I want to encourage you to look at humanity from a wider and truer point of view. [...] Humanity, in general, is neither perfectly good nor perfectly wicked.’<sup>1</sup>

Within the confines of the novel, the purpose of this advice, given by the noble and doting Hugh Mountjoy to his beloved Iris Henley at the start of *Blind Love*, is to reassure her that her adored Lord Harry Norland, despite his manifest treachery, is not irredeemably evil and may yet prove himself worthy of her devotion. Outside the confines of the novel, however, it is an assertion of Collins’s deep-seated belief in the ambivalence of human nature. Just as his ‘heroines’ defy their conventional roles, rising gracefully above the tribulations of pregnancy, prostitution, and persecution, so too do his villainesses flout the rules by which such wicked creatures should more properly be governed. His household devils, then, are no more wholly demonic than his domestic

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Blind Love* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1890; repr. New York: Dover, 1986), Chapter IV.



angels are wholly sublime, and once more Collins successfully undermines and blurs the accepted polarities of good/bad and self-sacrificing/self-serving. Nevertheless, he is not concerned simply with overturning binary oppositions, but with presenting an altogether more complex and unsettling view of human character. The novels examined in this chapter—*'I Say No'* (1884), *Blind Love* (1890), *The Legacy of Cain* (1888), and *Jezebel's Daughter* (1880)—contain a total of nine structurally important villainesses, regenerate and unregenerate evil-doers, very few of whom are totally lacking in positive attributes. It is also worth observing that in his narrative exploration of wicked women Collins challenges not only straight forward binary oppositions of a moral kind, but also questions other simplifying systems of understanding, namely race, heredity, physiognomy, and even reputation.



The first of these four novels, *'I Say No'*, is a curious one. Largely ignored by both modern and contemporary critics, Collins's last full-length excursion into detective fiction tells the story of the discovery made by Emily Brown that her father's death was not, as she had been led to believe, due to heart failure, nor, as she comes to suspect, to murder, but to suicide, prompted by the refusal of the fallen woman he wishes to marry to accede to his proposal. The fact that he chooses to slit his own throat, at an inn far from home, using another man's razor, and leaving no note to explain his action, naturally causes suspicion to fall upon the young man with whom he is sharing a room. The latter, aware that appearances are against him, and afraid to face the consequences, leads a fugitive existence, until Emily, with whom he has coincidentally fallen in love, learns his true identity, thus causing him to succumb to a fatal attack of brain fever. Emily, meanwhile, forgives her former drawing master, who, like her other friends has systematically thwarted her investigations into the cause of her father's demise, and, like the majority of Collins's heroines, settles down to the socially acceptable role of devoted wife.

The novel clearly has many faults which cannot simply be attributed to the reductive nature of this summary. Emily, for example, is portrayed as a perfectly pleasant girl,

but—lacking, on the one hand, the resolution and perspicacity of Valeria Macallan and Marian Halcombe, and, on the other, the total helplessness and frailty of Carmina Greywell and Laura Fairlie—she is a somewhat nondescript heroine. Alban Morris, the scowling, ill-tempered drawing master who eventually marries Emily, is an equally unacceptable hero, being prone to outbursts of jealousy, distrust, and misogyny. His attempts, along with those of Emily's Aunt Letitia, the latter's housekeeper Mrs Ellmother, and her physician Dr Allday, to hinder Emily in her pursuit of truth can only be partly excused by an urge to protect her from unpleasantness and from the stigma of being known as the daughter of a suicide.<sup>2</sup>

The structure of the novel also leaves much to be desired: Emily only assumes her role of female detective—'a girl self-devoted to the task of man'<sup>3</sup>—in the final quarter of the novel, and most of the relevant information she acquires comes not from her research into old newspaper reports and handbills, which she quite obdurately misinterprets, but from the delirious ramblings of her moribund aunt and a gravely ill housekeeper. This housekeeper, Mrs Rook, who remains veiled even on what she believes to be her death-bed lest she be seen without her customary cosmetic enhancement, had been the landlady at the inn where James Brown met his death, and she still carries, secreted about her person, the wallet containing certain epistolary clues which she stole from his corpse. The eventual denouement is, likewise, brought about more by chance than by logical deduction, and, after our appetites have been whetted by the thought of homicidal schoolteachers, landladies, and preachers, Collins lamely discloses that Mr Brown took his own life; a revelation which one reviewer likened to 'a very ridiculous mouse creeping

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<sup>2</sup> This cover-up was, of course, more comprehensible to the novel's contemporary readers than to its modern ones. As Barbara Gates illustrates, suicide was more distasteful than murder to middle-class Victorians, and respectable families, their physicians, and even clergymen would frequently collaborate in the concealing the details of such deaths. As well as being illegal and immoral, suicide was often linked with insanity, the reversion of property to the Crown, and, consequently, a slow and shameful death in the workhouse for the suicide's dependents. ('Wilkie Collins's Suicides: "Truth As It Is in Nature"', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 12 (1984), 303-18 (pp. 303-04)).

<sup>3</sup> Wilkie Collins, *'I Say No'* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1884; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1995), Chapter LII.

timid and ashamed from one of the innumerable crannies of the labouring mountain.’<sup>4</sup> As if this were not disappointment enough, we are also asked to accept that the statement upon which we have based all our assumptions—made by the apparently authoritative and reliable doctor who examined the body, that the dead man’s wound ‘could not have been inflicted, in the act of suicide, by the hand of the deceased person’ (*ISN*, Ch. XXV)—is quite simply wrong. Arguably, the doctor’s intention is to protect the dead man’s family from the stigma of suicide, but if this is implied, it is so subtly done as to be overlooked. Collins rarely betrays his reader in this way—his characters may lie, or be mistaken, but there is usually some palpable reason for their doing so—and we cannot help but feel cheated. Furthermore, blame which cannot be apportioned elsewhere is bestowed upon hitherto unmentioned godfathers and pimps, who, once they have served their purpose, disappear without trace, and the reader, who hopes to be able to assemble the clues and solve the mystery for himself, is thus thwarted in his endeavour.

In spite of its many failings, *‘I Say No’* is not without compensating features. The story is, as the *Saturday Review* acknowledged, ‘told with [...] force and dramatic skill,’ and many of the characters ‘attract and interest with a strange vitality.’<sup>5</sup> Of these strangely attractive and vitally interesting characters, two are particularly worthy of consideration: the enigmatic but disreputable Miss Jethro, and the vindictive schoolgirl Francine de Sor. It is through these figures, despite their relatively minor status within the novel, that Collins both challenges society’s prejudices, and illustrates the frequently ambivalent relationship between good and evil.

We first meet Sara Jethro, the first and more significant of these two wicked creatures, in the capacity of disgraced schoolmistress at Miss Ladd’s institute. Unpopular with her pupils, Miss Jethro is discovered to have gained her position under false pretences, and is instantly dismissed. Before she departs, however, she overhears Emily speaking of her

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<sup>4</sup> Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 58 (1884), 665-66; quoted in Page, p. 218.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

father, and reveals that she was once his friend. These strange confessions, made in the middle of the night when all her friends are sleeping, perplex Emily greatly. Is Miss Jethro bad or good, she wonders:

‘False; for she listened at the door. True; for she told me the tale of her own disgrace. A friend of my father; and she never knew that he had a daughter. Refined, accomplished, lady-like; and she stoops to use a false reference. Who is to reconcile such contradictions as these?’ (*ISN*, Ch. III)

The answer is, of course, ‘Collins’, but he will wait until the end of the novel before doing so. In the meantime, the reader must attempt a reconciliation of his own, and his conclusion must necessarily be informed by the prejudices which Collins manipulates for his own ends. Just as Francine de Sor is, as I shall show, a representation of the negroid other, Miss Jethro is her Semitic cousin. Anne Aresty Naman has illustrated in *The Jew in the Victorian Novel* that nineteenth-century society, and by extension nineteenth-century literature, was rife with anti-Semitism.<sup>6</sup> Whilst Collins never definitely states that Miss Jethro is a Jew, he makes it clear that she is Jew-ish. Her name, frequently commented on by the other characters, recalls the Jews’ struggles in the Old Testament, as Jethro was Moses’s father-in-law. She is described, upon her first appearance in the girls’ dormitory, as being tall, with ‘thick black hair (already streaked with grey),’ and, we are told:

In her younger days, the teacher must have been a handsome woman. Her grandly-formed features still suggested the idea of imperial beauty—perhaps Jewish in its origin. (*ISN*, Ch. III)

By the same token, when she pays an unexpected visit to the home of Doctor Allday, she is said to have ‘Noticeable features, of a Jewish cast—worn haggard but still preserving their grandeur of form’ (*ISN*, Ch. XVI).

As Naman points out, authors have always found it:

[...] natural to create a villain [or, in this case, a villainess] who embodies traits of those groups that society considers evil, for this not only makes the character

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Aresty Naman, *The Jew in the Victorian Novel: Some Relationships Between Prejudice and Art* (New York: AMS Press, 1980).

acceptable as a villain but also this enables the author to draw upon an existing emotional attitude in his readers. Thus, the Jew who is a familiar scapegoat in society will be a suitable villain for a novel.<sup>7</sup>

The Victorian mind, then, still associated the Jew with images, mediaeval in origin, of 'the moneylender, the murderer, the devil, [which] converge to form the image of the pariah—an outcast from society, a being separate from other beings.'<sup>8</sup> Certainly, Miss Jethro is an outcast from society: frequently mentioned by the other characters, she herself is 'present' in the novel for a mere five per cent of its total, and much of that time is spent in preparation for her next departure—she 'disappears' a total of four times—from both the story and from the society it depicts.

Collins, of course, is never so conformist in his attitudes as to allow so stereotypical a villainess as a Jewess to assume the mantle other writers would impose upon her. Whilst he is quite content to take that stereotype, and use it to 'draw upon an existing emotional attitude in his readers,' he is not content to let the image go unchallenged. Initially, Collins does seem to be pandering to dominant prejudices. He presents Miss Jethro as a spiritually and financially impoverished Jewish princess, and he is careful always to associate her with ideas of darkness and mystery: she appears for the first time in the dead of night, 'robed in a black dressing-gown,' and subsequently, in 'dark apparel,' or veiled, and her eyes, when we do see them, are 'dark [and] melancholy' (*ISN*, Chs. II, XVI, XXXVII). In addition, she is established as the prime suspect in the case of the murder of James Brown. Her anxiety to perform some service for Emily, coupled with her refusal to shake hands in friendship, hints at a guilty conscience. The fact that she admits to using false references, and then fails to give a reason encourages the reader to suspect the worst. Her revelations to Doctor Allday that she knew James Brown, and that Emily has been deceived about the manner of his death, seem highly suspicious given her subsequent silence on the matter. The urgency with which she asks Doctor Allday to discourage Emily from examining her aunt's papers, and Alban to prevent a meeting

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<sup>7</sup> Naman, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

between Emily and the preacher, Miles Mirabel, followed, in both cases, by her sudden flight when she learns that her requests come too late, indicate a fear of discovery, which can only implicate her in Brown's murder.

She is, thus far, damned by her own actions, or so it would appear. However, lest the generous-minded reader be inclined to make excuses for Miss Jethro, Collins has his other characters, trustworthy, reliable individuals, slander her for good measure. Aunt Letitia, who has been 'a second mother' to Emily (*ISN*, Ch. II), surely cannot be doubted, even when, delirious with rheumatic fever, she raves about a 'vile woman' (who is quickly identified as Sara Jethro), a man (whom the reader instantly recognizes as James Brown even though his own daughter does not), a 'lonely inn', and a 'murder' (*ISN*, Chs. XIII, XV). Doctor Allday deduces from Miss Jethro's brief visit that James Brown was murdered '— and that woman was concerned in it,' later refining his theory to make Miss Jethro the murderer's accomplice (*ISN*, Chs. XVII, XXVII). Her subsequent disappearance, and the discovery of her false testimonials, lower Miss Jethro still further in the estimation of the good doctor, who proclaims that 'I hesitate to attach credit to any statement that [she] may wish to make' (*ISN*, Ch. XXXVII). Even Mirabel, himself a murder suspect, blanches in terror at the mention of her name.

The covert nature of Miss Jethro's presumed villainy adds to its malevolence, and just as we are becoming convinced that there can be no extenuation for her crimes, Collins suddenly turns all our perceptions on their heads. Miss Jethro is, we realize, more sinned against than sinning. It is true that she had some—innocent—involvement in the death of James Brown, but she has been much maligned by narrow-minded individuals who have chosen to attribute base motives to her blameless actions. A fallen woman, Miss Jethro had, like so many of Collins's heroines, nobly refused to marry the man who loved her because to that would mean the loss of his reputation and position in society. James Brown, unlike George Germaine, Amelius Goldenheart, Julian Gray, *et al.*, takes her at her word, and, unable to face life without her, kills himself. When Alban suggests that she was, nevertheless, 'innocently responsible' for Brown's death, she denies it hotly: "Do you suppose I could for a moment anticipate that he would destroy himself [...]? He was a

truly religious man. If he had been in his right mind, he would have shrunk from the idea of suicide as from the idea of a crime' (*ISN*, Ch. LXVI). Alban is forced to agree. There is, however, evidence to show that Miss Jethro does not feel herself wholly exculpated in the matter: her original reluctance to allow Emily to consider that "'My father's friend [...] is surely my friend?'" (*ISN*, Ch. III) must stem from a more serious source of guilt than that of merely having used false testimonials.

Collins even explains the use of these contentious documents in a way that makes it seem injudicious, perhaps, but certainly not criminal: the testimonials belonged to a cousin, another Miss Jethro, who had worked legitimately as a governess, and who, out of pity, wished to assist her fallen relative in recovering her lost character by lending her the means of obtaining respectable employment. Likewise, Mirabel's horrified reaction upon hearing Miss Jethro's name is accounted for: she was the person who helped him to escape to France after the terrible event at the inn, and the 'painful associations' (*ISN*, Ch. XLV) to which he refers relate to the situation from which she saved him, not to the one which she caused. Miss Jethro's sudden flight, which so offended Doctor Allday, is revealed to have been a bid to escape, not from whatever dread discovery Emily may have been about to make, but from persecution by the man who was responsible for 'the shame and misery of [Miss Jethro's] past life' (*ISN*, Ch. LXVI). In addition, Collins also discredits Aunt Letitia, whose dislike of Miss Jethro he shows to be nothing more than 'an old maid's hatred of the handsome young woman, who lured [Brown] away from home, and set up a secret [...] between her brother and herself' (*ISN*, Ch. LI). Not content with sending private investigators to learn the nature and location of Brown's trysts with Miss Jethro, Aunt Letitia is also responsible for sending to Miss Ladd the letter which ensures the rapid curtailment of Miss Jethro's teaching career.

In this cleverly worked reversal, Collins persuades us that all our prejudices against Miss Jethro—whether textual or anti-Semitic in origin—have no basis in fact, and he leaves us with the impression that this noble and self-sacrificing creature is, in fact, the true heroine of the novel. This impression is, however, no more accurate than was our previous one, when we believed Miss Jethro to be such a wholly wicked creature. The Miss

Jethro who is so desperate to regain her place in society that she misappropriates her cousin's testimonials may indeed be a truly repentant woman; the Miss Jethro with whom James Brown was so hopelessly in love was not. Mrs Ellmother is mistaken when she assumes that Aunt Letitia had merely "taken it into her head that he was entangled in a sort of love-affair of the shameful sort" (*ISN*, Ch. LI) for James Brown was enamoured of a woman who was, by Victorian standards, leading a life of the utmost degradation.

When Brown writes to Miss Jethro begging her to reconsider her decision not to become his wife, reassuring her that 'your true repentance has made you worthy of the pardon of God' (*ISN*, Ch. LXVI), he tells her that, if she replies immediately, he will be able to collect her letter the following evening. Miss Jethro obeys his instruction and answers, in the words of the title, 'I Say No.' Brown calls for the letter as he said he would, reads it, and with no thought for the effect his action may have on his daughter, takes his own life that very night. When Collins asks us to believe that Miss Jethro says 'No' because she wishes to protect the reputation of the man she loves, he asks us to believe an untruth. Miss Jethro has two perfectly good reasons for refusing to become Mrs Brown, neither of which is openly stated in the text. Firstly, Miss Jethro has not repented of her fallen state, and is, in fact, still revelling in it. When the fugitive Mirabel encounters her and asks for her help, no more than two or three days can have passed since Brown received the fatal letter; and at that time, as Miss Jethro informs Alban Morris, "I was living [...] in a cottage which had been taken for me by a gentleman who was the owner of a yacht," and the two of them had just returned from 'a short cruise' (*ISN*, Ch. LXVI). Gentlemen who take cottages for, and cruises with, young women of dubious morals rarely do so—in Victorian times any more than nowadays—for purely philanthropic reasons. Also, the expenditure involved in these pursuits would seem to be more than poor love-sick James Brown, with landed property but no real money, could have afforded, and Miss Jethro, at that time at any rate, wanted only the good things in life.

The second reason Miss Jethro refuses to marry James Brown is, perhaps, the more honourable one. She is, no doubt, fond of her admirer, but she is probably equally fond of the gentleman with the yacht. This is not a tale of ill-starred romance between two people



whom only death can unite. All the declarations of love come from Brown, and, when Alban inquires of Miss Jethro, “Did you love him?” she answers, surprised by the naïveté of such a question, “Have *I* any right to love?” (*ISN*, Ch. LXVI).

Her subsequent attempts to lead a more respectable life as a schoolmistress are generated not, as the reader may be tempted to believe, because Miss Jethro yearns to be worthy of the memory of her dead lover, but because, as we already know, her hair is turning grey, her imperial features are growing haggard, and the number of generous and adoring ‘gentlemen’ available—with or without yachts—is no doubt decreasing rapidly. Gone are the days when her beauty alone could drive the James Browns of this world to suicide: Miss Jethro is growing old, and she needs an alternative, and more reliable, source of income.

The second wicked creature in *I Say No* is Francine de Sor, who, unlike Miss Jethro, lives up to that epithet, although her true malevolence is not immediately discernible. Placed in the alien setting of a genteel English boarding school dormitory, Francine appears more victim than persecutor: she is, we learn, at nineteen, a year older than her fellow students who treat her with disdain; her education has been neglected; her father is rich, but unloving; and, most significantly of all from the point of view of Collins’s xenophobic Victorian readers, she hails from the West Indies. Although Collins has Francine explain as early as the second chapter of the novel that her father is a Spanish gentleman and her mother an Englishwoman, the initial—and lasting—impression the reader gains of this rather elderly schoolgirl is one of racial otherness, of evolutionary degeneration. Indeed, Collins’s description of ‘her long upper lip, her obstinate chin, her sallow complexion, her eyes placed too close together’ (*ISN*, Ch. I) creates an image of an almost sub-human being. Carl Vogt, Professor of Natural History at the University of Geneva, and a respected Victorian craniologist, was prone to using the adjective ‘simious’ to describe the evolutionary inferiority of the Negro, and, whilst Francine may be as European as her classmates, the parallel is incontrovertible.

Perhaps surprisingly, Collins appears to do little here to contradict dominant racial prejudices and stereotyping, and whilst he does not condemn her to quite the same fate as Charlotte Brontë did ~~to~~ that other, more famous, literary West Indian, Bertha Mason Rochester, his treatment of Francine is far from sympathetic. In the nineteenth century, Creoles were generally believed to be superstitious, lazy, and dishonest, qualities which Collins bestows upon Francine with great liberality: afraid of the 'school ghost', she is prepared to assume responsibility for leaving a light burning in the dormitory; her position as student is short-lived when she proves to have no interest in learning her lessons, thus causing one of her masters to refuse to teach her any longer; and her eavesdropping and misrepresentation of Emily's relationship with the 'popular preacher' Miles Mirabel can hardly be described as the actions of a morally unimpeachable and honest soul. It must, however, be remembered that Francine is *not* of negro extraction, and that by attributing those characteristics normally associated in the nineteenth century with people of non-white ethnic origins, Collins is, in fact, promoting a stereotype only subsequently to destroy it.

Discussing her abilities with a pencil, Francine tells Emily that she was taught by Sappho, a mulatto slave whose life she had—no doubt, inadvertently—saved. Sappho had, Francine opines, 'a white side to her character, and a black side. For weeks together, she would be a civilized being. Then she used to relapse, and become as complete a negress as her mother' (*JSN*, Ch. XXXI). The words are Collins's; the vocabulary recalls Grant Allen's 'John Creedy'; but the sentiment is Francine's, and it must surely be a deliberately confrontational act on the author's part that he chooses this character to voice society's views on racial difference.<sup>9</sup> Francine, for all her genetic 'whiteness', also has two sides to her character, each as 'black' as the other, and her ability to behave in a civilized manner is limited to hours rather than weeks. Even more threatening to Victorian peace of mind is Collins's inversion of Francine's ostensibly negroid characteristics. Having shown her to

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<sup>9</sup> 'The Reverend John Creedy', written in 1880, tells the story of an African savage, who after being brought to England, and educated at Oxford, returns as a missionary, with his white English wife, to Africa. With time, he inexorably reverts into savagery, much to his wife's horror (Grant Allen, *Strange Stories* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1884)).

be superstitious, lazy, and dishonest, he paints an even more unpleasant portrait of her when she is level-headed, diligent, and truthful.

Mrs Ellmother has served Emily's aunt for over a quarter of a century. The old woman's death leaves her 'out of place', until Francine, in need of a maid now she is to be a 'guest' rather than a 'pupil' at Miss Ladd's school, decides to employ her. Aware that her new servant knows more than she is willing to admit about the circumstances in which Emily's father died, Francine takes cruel advantage of the old woman's superstitious nature in an attempt to terrify her into betraying her secret. The strain of nursing her former mistress through her last illness, and of maintaining the pretence that Mr Brown died of heart failure, coupled with the peculiarities of her new mistress, and the unfamiliarity of her new place of residence, combine to make Mrs Ellmother ill: she is unable to sleep at night, cannot eat, and jumps at the slightest noise. Francine, despite her own fear of ghosts, has no qualms about exploiting others who suffer similarly from unfounded terrors. She quickly establishes that Mrs Ellmother believes in witchcraft, then turns the conversation to voodoo in the West Indies, before suddenly revealing a waxen image of the elderly servant, pierced with three pins—one 'for no sleep;' another 'for no appetite;' and a third 'for broken nerves' (*ISN*, Ch. XXXV).

As a description of gratuitous cruelty, this scene surpasses anything else that Collins wrote. Francine delights in her power, her ingenuity, her ability to terrorize, in a way unknown to Collins's other villains: Doctor Benjulia, for example, is prepared to experiment on monkeys and humans alike, but he does so in the name of science; Geoffrey Delamayn's cruelty stems from panic, and is the reaction of the cornered 'animal' to which he is frequently compared; even Miserrimus Dexter, who tortures his servant, Ariel, for the—arguably mutual—pleasure of the game, inflicts only pain, not fear.

Francine's scheme almost fails: Mrs Ellmother, given the choice between revealing her secret and dying 'by inches' (*ISN*, Ch. XXXV), flees the scene, running straight into Alban Morris, who is enjoying a quiet stroll and a smoke in the garden. Glad to find a friend, Mrs

Ellmother confides in Alban, to whom her secret is, to her surprise, already known. Francine, meanwhile, despite academic indolence, shows remarkable tenacity and perseverance when it comes to matters of particular interest to her. Silently pursuing Mrs Ellmother into the garden, she is able to locate her quarry by the smell of Alban's pipe, and thus learns the secret which she has worked so hard to discover; namely, that Mr James Brown was found with his throat cut at a country inn, and, even more gratifyingly from Francine's point of view, that "Miss Emily must never know it to her dying day" (*ISN*, Ch. XXXV).

Aunt Letitia, Emily's only surviving relative, Mrs Ellmother, who nursed Emily as a baby and loves her as her own, Doctor Allday, who 'could hardly be more anxious about her, if [he] were her father' (*ISN*, Ch. XXVII), and Alban Morris, whose infatuation with Emily is so great that he seeks employment at the school she attends, are, we are to believe, the four people with Emily's best interests closest to heart. They are also the four people who, having reached the conclusion that James Brown was murdered, place as many obstacles in the way of the unfortunate girl's investigations as are in their power. However, Francine—who does not love Emily, and accordingly, does not feel obliged to lie to her—maliciously tells Emily the very truth from which everyone else has protected her.

Despite creating in Francine an amalgam of all that was popularly considered to be undesirable in black people, and—albeit distortedly—all that was considered desirable in white people, Collins then tries, kind-heartedly, to find some justification for his wicked young woman's actions. Throughout the novel, he highlights her alienation from her peers. The schoolgirls evidently do not want her to be involved in their midnight feast, nor do they include her in their preparations for 'Grand Day', the annual prize-giving and entertainment. Emily, whom we fondly suppose to be polite and charming at all times, '[takes] the opportunity (in the popular phrase) of snubbing Francine' (*ISN*, Ch. V) when the latter inquires, innocently for once, if Emily regrets having to leave the school. The welcome Emily accords Francine when the two meet in London is equally hostile. Even the wealthy Mr de Sor seems to have such an antipathy towards Francine that he will provide "Anything my daughter likes as long as she doesn't come back to us" (*ISN*, Postscript).

The only person ever to have shown any love towards Francine was Sappho, her father's slave, but Sappho is now dead and Francine is alone, 'without a creature to care for [her]' (*ISN*, Ch. VII).<sup>10</sup>

When Francine does attempt to find love and friendship, her efforts are invariably rebuffed. What Francine really wants is a husband. As she tells Emily, "I may expect to be married (with my money), if I can only get into good society" (*ISN*, Ch. XXVIII). Her first target is Alban Morris, whom she selects for a variety of ignoble reasons:

In the first place, he was a man. In the second place, he was not as old as the music-master, or as ugly as the dancing master. In the third place he was an admirer of Emily; and the opportunity of trying to shake his allegiance by means of a flirtation, in Emily's absence, was too good an opportunity to be lost. (*ISN*, Ch. XXXII)

Although Francine never once imagines herself to be truly enamoured of Alban, his indifference to her blandishments wounds her deeply, and her pride is such that she cannot forgive this perceived slight.

Her efforts to make Miles Mirabel, for whom she seems to have developed a genuine affection, fall in love with her are, however, portrayed very differently. Mirabel does not treat her as 'a young lady with an obstinate chin and unfortunately placed eyes' (*ISN*, Ch. II); he does not show any overwhelming desire to escape her company; and, when asked for his opinion of Francine (or, indeed, of any of the other girls), 'he is careful [...] to say something that will bear repetition:'

'I see in Miss de Sor,' he declares, 'the resolution of a man, tempered by the sweetness of a woman. When that interesting creature marries, her husband will be [...] henpecked [but] he will enjoy it; and he will be quite right to; and, if I am asked to the wedding, I shall say, with heartfelt sincerity, Envidable man!' (*ISN*, Ch. XXXVIII)

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<sup>10</sup> Collins's choice of name for Francine's friend may be deliberate, suggesting yet another form of otherness and alienation from her peers.

Mirabel quite clearly has no intention of becoming that enviably henpecked husband, but, by the time Francine is informed of his views, repetition will have changed to embellishment, and she must be forgiven for believing that her feelings are at least partly reciprocated. This makes her bold:

If he [Mirabel] had been the most modest man that ever lived, he must have seen in Francine's face that she loved him.

When they had first been presented to each other, she was still under the influence of the meanest instincts in her scheming and selfish nature. [...] As the days passed, strong feeling had taken the place of those contemptible aspirations: Mirabel had unconsciously inspired the one passion which was powerful enough to master Francine—sensual passion. Wild hopes rioted in her. Measureless desires which she had never felt before, united themselves with capacities for wickedness. (*ISN*, Ch. XLII)

So desperate is she to win Mirabel's affection that she offers him the one thing which he needs, and which Emily does not possess—money. Mirabel may be a coward who shrinks from growling dogs and runs from dead bodies, but he has, thanks to his love for Emily, enough manly virtues to make the idea of selling himself distasteful. Francine's suggestion may, of course, have been differently received had it been made some little time earlier, when Mirabel was less devoted to Emily, and could still appreciate the 'folly of making an offer of marriage to a woman who was as poor as himself' (*ISN*, Ch. XXXIX).

Blinded by his love for Emily, Mirabel also fails to appreciate the folly of telling Francine that he takes a favourable view of his chances with her rival. At this point, all the 'wild hopes' and 'measureless desires' which Francine has been entertaining are seen to be as futile as her other attempts to win the love, friendship, or admiration of another human being. Out of jealousy, she tells Emily the secret of her father's death, in the hope that her enemy will flee the scene and leave Mirabel to her machinations. The result is only partly successful: Emily goes to London—but Mirabel follows her. Francine is once more left unwanted and alone.

Miss Ladd's house is closed to her as soon as her treachery is discovered; her father, as we know, will not allow her to return home; Alban and Emily marry; and Mirabel dies of brain fever. Francine's isolation is complete, and the novel ends as it began, with Francine

set apart from society. She has, it would seem, forsaken her wicked ways and joined an enclosed, contemplative order of nuns in the West of England. It is, however, difficult to believe that ‘slighted love and clever proselytising’ (*ISN*, Postscript) could have such a redemptive effect, and one cannot help feeling that Francine’s ‘vocation’ is nothing more than a temporary expedient. As Alban Morris comments, ‘She is too heartless and wicked not to prosper’ (*ISN*, Postscript).

Both Francine and Miss Jethro are, then, victims of undeserved prejudice based on their perceived ethnicity, and yet neither can be considered a persecuted innocent. Although Collins establishes, plays upon, and ultimately refutes his readers’ assumed stereotypes, he is too wily merely to offer us their virtuous opposites: the two villainesses in ‘*I Say No*’ are undeniably wicked, but they are wicked because they choose to be, and not because they happen to have been born under the Star of David or on the island of Hispaniola.



Collins’s final novel, *Blind Love*, which Robert Ashley rather tenuously considers ‘a novel with a plot strikingly similar to that of *The Woman in White*,’<sup>11</sup> presents us with another pair of villainesses, who, whilst fulfilling the split heroine rôle, also challenge any assumptions the reader may care to make about what constitutes vice and virtue. The first of these women, Iris Henley, despite being spoilt, selfish, and wilful, begins her career in the novel ostensibly as a traditional heroine. Her counterpart, Arabella Vimpany, is introduced as a malevolent figure, but, whilst Iris’s ‘goodness’ gradually decreases, Mrs Vimpany’s increases at the same rate. Fortunately for both characters, however, Collins allows circumstances to conspire in their favour, and, despite their past sins, they are successfully re-established in society as respectable, worthy citizens.

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<sup>11</sup> Ashley, *Wilkie Collins*, p. 124.

Collins based *Blind Love* on a combination of sources: some ideas he ‘rescued’ from his earlier, disastrous play, *Rank and Riches*, which he had already reworked as ‘Iris’, a short story about a woman’s unwavering loyalty to an undeserving wretch; others he extracted from a true story, told to him by his friend Horace Pym, about a particularly unsavoury insurance fraud. In *Blind Love* Iris Henley becomes estranged from her family, marries Lord Harry Norland, an Irish nobleman, against whom her friends—individuals as doting and meddlesome as Emily’s acquaintances in ‘*I Say No*’—warn her, becomes involved in a plot to make a fraudulent claim on her husband’s life insurance, realizes that murder is involved, and that she would prefer to live a life of quiet respectability after all, becomes conveniently widowed, and finally marries Hugh Mountjoy, her constant admirer.

Hugh has been present throughout the novel, firstly trying to prevent Iris’s marriage to Lord Harry, and subsequently—when not suffering from scarlet fever—telling her how unhappy she is with her husband. Lord Harry, himself, for all Collins chooses to refer to him by such epithets as ‘the wild lord’, and ‘the Irish blackguard’, is a character who inspires pity, rather than the fear Hugh seems to think he should generate. The series of catastrophes in the young Lord’s early life, his involvement in a Fenian conspiracy, and his eventual embroilment in Clarence Vimpany’s murderous scheme, reveal a rather gullible individual who lacks the sense to see where his misplaced loyalties will lead. Even Mrs Vimpany, of whom the same could once have been said, predicts that “‘He will drift into bad company; he will listen to bad advice; and he will do things in the future which he might shrink from doing now’” (*BL*, Ch. XXIV).

Mentally unstable and emotionally insecure, he has one redeeming feature: his devotion to the memory of his friend, Arthur Mountjoy, whose murder he swears to avenge.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lord Harry’s psychological inadequacy is of relevance to this study only inasmuch as it enables Collins to establish a contrast between his good characters and his villain, and once more to blur the boundary between them. This would-be Machiavellian character, then, attempts, with startling ineptitude, to take his own life after losing all his money at the races, and is prepared to marry Iris, even though, prior to his attempt at suicide, she regarded him with no little repugnance, and, after his recovery, appears willing to enter into matrimony largely out of an over-developed sense of pity.



Curiously, Arthur's brother, Hugh, whom we are expected to regard as possessing noble and admirable qualities, shows no signs of distress, grief, or indignation at his sibling's death, preferring instead to concentrate his energies on trying to organize Iris's life. Lord Harry, despite praiseworthy motives, once again demonstrates his inability to succeed in any endeavour: he pursues Arthur's assassin across the Atlantic and back again, but time after time, the man slips from his grasp, until, in a final ironical confrontation, it is the assassin who kills Harry, rather than the reverse. Foolhardy and incautious, he is, nevertheless, a convincingly portrayed figure, and Peters is right in her estimation of him as 'one of the better male characters in Wilkie's later fiction.'<sup>13</sup>

Lord Harry is led astray by the disreputable doctor, Clarence Vimpany, who enters the novel under his wife's control, but in Harry's pay. Once the Vimpanys part company, however, Clarence reveals himself to be the more devious and unpleasant, reminiscent in his scheming of a malevolent Captain Wragge, whilst Arabella undergoes a startling metamorphosis and emerges as a noble-minded, compassionate sibyl.<sup>14</sup>

Lord Harry, Hugh Mountjoy, and Mrs Vimpany all have a common interest in the novel, Iris Henley, one of Collins's most infuriating and stubborn heroines. We learn, as early as the fourth chapter of the Prologue, that Iris has quarrelled with her father, has no friends of her own age, and is hoping that her godfather, Sir Giles Mountjoy, uncle of Arthur and Hugh, will accommodate her. By the time another three chapters have elapsed, Iris has also managed to alienate him. This estrangement from her godfather is brought about when, after her meddling has caused her to be arrested for assisting the escape of a

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<sup>13</sup> Peters, p. 428.

<sup>14</sup> *Blind Love* was begun by Collins shortly before his death. Aware that he would not live to finish the story, which was already being serialized in the *Illustrated London News*, Collins asked Walter Besant, whose ideas on fiction—if not his usual prose style—coincided quite closely with Collins's own, to finish the novel from the detailed notes that were already prepared. Although Besant completed the last nineteen chapters and the Epilogue, the novel is essentially Collins's; and the ideas are most certainly his. Whilst, stylistically, the join is almost seamless—Besant's language is a little more hyperbolic than Collins's—Besant was obviously so accustomed to referring to Arabella and Clarence Vimpany by their titles that he did not realize that Collins had already bestowed forenames upon them. Arabella is thus rechristened L. Vimpany, and Clarence, A. Vimpany (*BL*, Ch. LV, Epilogue).

suspected felon, she then expects the old gentleman, at great personal expense and inconvenience, to rush to the aid of a nephew whom he does not seriously believe to be in danger. Iris leaves the house in anger. Had she managed to contain herself a little, and explain her concerns in a calm, reasoned manner, Sir Giles might have been persuaded to intervene. Instead, her precipitate demands merely anger her godfather, and result, not only in his disowning her, but also, indirectly, in the loss of Arthur's life.

Possibly Collins was hoping to create in Iris another Magdalen Vanstone, who, however misguidedly, refuses to adhere to a conventional code of behaviour and morality when she instinctively feels another course of action to be more appropriate. If so, this intention remains unfulfilled: Magdalen was distinguished by her great reserves of ingenuity and resilience; Iris is distinguished only by her almost hysterical impetuosity and constant moral outrage. More probably, however, Collins had no desire to revisit old ground, and his object in creating Iris is to demonstrate that those we have been conditioned automatically to accept as admirable are frequently the cause of more trouble than those we unquestioningly condemn as worthless.

Iris, then, is a deliberately stylized facsimile of the strong, independent women Collins has previously shown that he can create with such consummate skill. Indeed, Collins makes no pretence of wishing to establish for her a place in his readers' memories, and even seems to be at pains to make her as unmemorable as possible:

When Iris Henley dies there will, in all probability, be friends left who remember her and talk of her—and there may be strangers present at the time (women for the most part), whose curiosity will put questions relating to her personal appearance. No replies will reward them with trustworthy information. Miss Henley's chief claim to admiration lay in a remarkable mobility of expression, which reflected every change of feeling peculiar to the nature of a sweet and sensitive woman. For this reason, probably, no descriptions of her will agree with each other. No existing likenesses will represent her. The one portrait that was painted of Iris is only recognisable by partial friends of the artist. In and out of London, photographic likenesses were taken of her. They have the honour of resembling the portraits of Shakespeare in this respect—compared with one another, it is not possible to discover that they present the same person. As for the evidence offered by the loving memory of her friends, it is sure to be

contradictory in the last degree. She had a charming face, a commonplace face, an intelligent face—a poor complexion, a delicate complexion, no complexion at all—eyes that were expressive of a hot temper, of a bright intellect, of a firm character, of an affectionate disposition, of a truthful nature, of hysterical sensibility, of inveterate obstinacy—a figure too short; no, just the right height; no, neither one thing or the other; elegant, if you like—dress shabby; oh, surely not; dress quiet and simple; no something more than that; ostentatiously quiet, theatrically simple, worn with the object of looking unlike other people. In one last word, was this mass of contradictions generally popular, in the time when it was a living creature? Yes—among the men. No—not invariably. [...] And, when the poor creature married (if she did marry), how many of you attended the wedding? Not one of us! And when she died, how many of you were sorry for her? All of us! What? no difference of opinion in that one particular? On the contrary, perfect concord, thank God. (*BL*, Prologue, Ch. III)

When Charlotte Brontë chose to give her readers no description at all of her heroine Lucy Snowe (save one reference to the young Lucy's hair as brown, and another to the elderly Lucy's hair as white), she allowed us to create our own physiognomy for her protagonist. When Collins gives us so many apparently conflicting images of Iris, he appears deliberately to be rendering her insubstantial and uninteresting. Her blandness is not even alleviated, as was Anne Silvester's, by facial tics and ocular casts. Iris is, as her creator says, 'neither one thing or the other.' Nevertheless, this passage can be interpreted as both a warning against definitions of character based solely upon external appearances, and a suggestion of the way Iris, and indeed her fellow characters, will be viewed throughout the novel. As early as the 1850s Collins had objected to stereotypical depictions of good and bad as respectively fair and dark, and in 'A Petition to the Novel-Writers', suggested that some daring author might like to try the dangerous experiment of inverting those signifiers.<sup>15</sup> In *Blind Love*, he goes one step further, and implies that any purely visual indication of personality, morality, or temperament must necessarily be interpreted subjectively and, therefore, be open to error. By making his heroine elusive, rather than questioning the reliability of such representations, Collins is saying that they are, ultimately, of no consequence, and that such flimsily based value judgments are pernicious and absurd.

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<sup>15</sup> See pages 33-34 above.

For this reason, Collins avoids the single-minded heroine figure that we have come to associate with him, and presents us with a protagonist whose actions throughout the novel show a surprising degree of uncertainty and inconsistency, and who is herself a mass of contradictions. Having at some time before the story begins promised herself in marriage to Lord Harry, Iris now seems to doubt the wisdom of her engagement. When her well-informed maid furnishes her with details about Harry's past life, Iris is horrified, and 'she felt, as she had never felt before, how entirely right her father had been in insisting on her resistance to an attachment which was unworthy of her' (*BL*, Prologue, Ch. IX). However, no sooner has the reader realized that poor Iris is being pursued, against her will, by an evil man who will not release her from a promise made in haste and regretted thereafter, Iris arranges to meet her persecutor, and Collins assures us that 'Iris might have found it easier to persuade herself that she was yielding to sheer necessity, if she had not been guiltily conscious of a feeling of pleasure at the prospect of seeing Lord Harry again' (*BL*, Ch. XVII). Before this meeting takes place, however, Lord Harry tries to commit suicide, an action which for some reason appeals to Iris, who, we soon discover, has consented to marry him. When she visits Hugh to tell him of her engagement, the typical elation of the prospective bride is, however, conspicuous by its absence: 'her manner was subdued; her face was haggard; her hand was cold and passive in his hand, when he advanced to bid her welcome' (*BL*, Ch. XXI). The reader may wonder what hold Harry can possibly have over Iris that she should be prepared to become his wife when that prospect has such a detrimental effect on her; but Iris has already provided the answer to this:

'Since I left Ireland, I have sunk (I don't know how or why) into a state of superstitious fear. Yes! I believe in a fatality which is leading me back to Lord Harry, in spite of myself [...] I have done my best to escape from that man; and, step by step, as I think I am getting away, Destiny is taking me back to him.' (*BL*, Ch. II)

Nevertheless, the early stages of her marriage seem to be quite happy, and Iris, despite the horror she evinced at her maid's revelations about Harry's past transgressions, now appears to regard him as the epitome of unblemished integrity. When Hugh worries that

Harry will have spent all of Iris's small personal fortune on some reckless speculation, she is, as she so very often is, quite horrified by the suggestion:

"My husband refused to touch my fortune,' Iris [said]. 'But'—she paused there. 'Do you know how honourably, how nobly, he has behaved?' she abruptly resumed. 'He has insured his life: he has burdened himself with the payment of a large sum of money every year. And all for me, if I am so unfortunate (which God forbid!) as to survive him. When a large share in the newspaper was for sale, do you think I could be ungrateful enough to let him lose the chance of making our fortune, when the profits begin to come in? I insisted on advancing the money—we almost quarrelled about it—but, you know how sweet he is. I said "Don't distress me"; and the dearest of men let me have my own way.' (*BL*, Ch. XXVII)

This venture into publishing has, of course, left Iris with almost no money. Hugh's offer to provide a loan is, naturally, another cause for Iris's favourite brand of outraged reaction. When Harry echoes this suggestion, Iris's indignation is so great that she storms out of the room, leaving her husband, in desperation, to agree to Vimpany's scheme to murder a man and claim on the lord's insurance policy. Had Iris been prepared to listen to the reasons behind her husband's need for money, a solution could perhaps have been found to their problem. Indeed, when the die has been cast, and the unfortunate Oxbye has been sacrificed, Iris implores her husband to:

'Come with me somewhere—the world is large!—to some place where you are not known, and there let us begin a new life [...] We have not much money, but I can sell my watches and chains and rings, and we shall have enough.' (*BL*, Ch. LVII)

Too selfish to consider the needs of her husband, and to contemplate making Hugh Mountjoy a happy man by allowing him to lend her some of his fortune, Iris's hot-headed intolerance, coupled now with a misplaced sense of propriety, results, once more, in the death of an innocent man.

Iris's sense of propriety is, like all her other reactions, highly erratic and volatile. When Hugh wants her to leave Mrs Vimpany's house, and return 'on trial' to her father, Iris is more concerned about her new friend's feelings than about re-establishing familial harmony:

'After all that I owe to that good creature's kindness; after I have promised to accompany her—she has so few happy days, poor soul!—on excursions to places

of interest in the neighbourhood, do you expect me to leave her—no! it's worse than that—do you expect me to throw her aside like an old dress that I have worn out? And this after I have so unjustly, so ungratefully suspected her in my own thoughts? Shameful! shameful!' (*BL*, Ch.VIII)

However, as soon as she perceives that Mr Vimpany has insulted Hugh, her anxiety to repay his wife's kindness with her company is quickly dispersed, and Mrs Vimpany does not even merit a passing thought in Iris's sudden determination to quit the house.

Curiously, when she learns that a fraud—albeit not a fraud with murder as its linchpin—has been perpetrated by her husband and Vimpany, Iris's initial reaction is one of relative calm:

She accepted the situation. [Lord Harry] was amazed at the readiness with which she fell; but he did not understand how she was ready to cling to him, for better for worse, through worse evils than this; nor could he understand how things formerly impossible to her had been rendered possible by the subtle deterioration of the moral nature, when a woman of lofty mind at the beginning loves and is united to a man of lower nature and coarser fibre than herself. Only a few months before, Iris would have swept aside these sophistries with swift and resolute hand. Now she accepted them.' (*BL*, Ch. LIII)

Now she accepted them; but the mercurial Iris cannot be relied upon to accept anything two days together. Just as Harry's plan seems to be about to succeed, and Iris is preparing to go to the offices of the Royal Unicorn Life Insurance Company, in the guise of the grieving widow, to make the claim, Iris feels that she has been amenable for too long:

'Oh, Harry!—she burst into tears. 'I cannot—I cannot. You ask me to be a liar and a thief—oh! heavens!—a vile thief!'

'It is too late, Iris! We are all vile thieves. It is too late to begin crying now.'

'Harry'—she threw herself upon her knees—'spare me! Let some other woman go, and call herself your widow. Then I will go away and hide myself.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Iris,' he replied roughly. 'I tell you it is far too late. you should have thought of this before. It is now all arranged.'

'I cannot go,' she said.

'You must go; otherwise, all our trouble may prove useless.'

'Then I will not go!' she declared, springing to her feet. 'I will not degrade myself any further. I will not go!' (*BL*, Ch. LVII)

Her moral scruples here are not absolute: whilst she has changed her mind about visiting the Insurance Company, Iris has no objection to another woman going in her stead.

However, after causing her husband a moment of anxiety, she reverts to her previous viewpoint, and makes the false claim.

When Iris is eventually informed, in a letter from her maid, that her husband was involved in murder as well as fraud, she is, justifiably for once, aghast. Unfortunately, her previous bouts of righteous indignation have done much to lessen the reader's sympathy for her, as has her seemingly wilful determination to forget any suspicions she once entertained. When Oxbye was first installed at her home, she was aware that something was amiss:

She was asked to believe that a new system of medical practice had been invented by such a person as Mr. Vimpany. She was asked to believe that an invalid from a foreign hospital, who was a perfect stranger to Lord Harry, had been willingly made welcome to a bedroom at the cottage. She was asked to believe that this astounding concession had been offered to the doctor as a tribute of friendship, after her husband had himself told her that he regretted having invited Vimpany, for the second time, to become his guest. Here was one improbable circumstance accumulated on another, and a clever woman was expected to accept the monstrous excuses, thus produced, as a trustworthy statement of facts. (*BL*, XLIII)

This 'clever woman', who knows that the patient bears an uncanny resemblance to her husband, is also asked to believe that a funeral is carried out apparently with no body in the coffin, and that the invalid has made such an implausibly rapid recovery that, in rude health, he has gone on his way. Despite these improbable circumstances, Iris still manages not to guess at the truth, and when it is eventually brought home to her in a form that she cannot misinterpret, her reaction, which starts on a note of moral grievance, soon takes on a more self-interested tone:

'You acquiesced in [the murder]. You consented. You should have warned the—the other murderer that you would denounce him if the man died. You took advantage of it. His death enabled you to carry out your fraud with me as your accomplice. With ME! I am an accomplice in a murder!' (*BL*, Ch. LXI)

Iris leaves Harry, to return to England in the hope of being able to make reparation to the defrauded Insurance Company. The secluded life which she had been living with Harry in Louvain, masquerading as the wife of Mr William Linville, and to which she had so plaintively objected, is now replaced by an equally unstimulating one in England, masquerading as the cousin of her own maid. Her fear of being discovered as a

conspirator in an insurance fraud is now replaced by a fear of being discovered as such in an insurance fraud that also involves murder. Her marriage is at an end, although the reader may choose to believe that it had ended before she realized the full gravity of her husband's criminal involvement. One day, bored with her life in Louvain, and feeling sorry for herself, Iris had thought back fondly of past happiness:

Then, as one who has been wearing coloured glasses puts them off and sees things in their true colours, she saw how she had been pulled down by a blind infatuation to the level of the man who had held her in his fascination; she saw him as he was—reckless, unstable, careless of name and honour. Then for the first time she realised the depths into which she was plunged and the life which she was henceforth doomed to lead. The blind love fell from her—it was dead at last; but it left her bound to the man by a chain which nothing could break; she was in her right senses; she saw things as they were; but the knowledge came too late. (*BL*, Ch. LX)

Certainly it would appear that Iris has, after all her inconstancy and vacillation, reached a definite decision about her husband, and when, having repaid his share of the money and believing he has lost Iris for good, he conveniently allows himself to be murdered, there seems to be nothing to prevent Iris from marrying Hugh. Indeed, there is not, and the novel's Epilogue informs us that within two years of Harry's death, Iris becomes Mrs Hugh Mountjoy. This is, however, Collins's story, even if it was finished by another man, and for a chameleon character like Iris, marital bliss is not the answer. The novel ends with the revelation that Iris has reassumed her 'coloured glasses', and has decided that she will derive more masochistic delight from loving a dead man than a living husband: 'She has one secret—and only one—which she keeps from her husband. In her desk she preserves a lock of Lord Harry's hair' (*BL*, Epilogue).<sup>16</sup>

Another example, not only of the unreliability of external appearance, but also of the mutability of character comes in the form of the villainess-turned-housekeeper, Arabella

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<sup>16</sup> Iris's masochism has already been suggested: after she has revealed to Hugh that, despite his comparatively angelic status, she still prefers his debased rival, "'Oh," she cried, with reckless contempt for herself, "why don't you beat me? I deserve it!"' (*BL*, Ch. II); and she seems, throughout, to enjoy wallowing in her debasement.



Vimpany, who undergoes a startling metamorphosis during the course of the novel. She begins her career in the story as Lord Harry's paid spy, and it is in this capacity that she first makes Iris's acquaintance. Her apparent kindness to Iris and her seasick maid on a steamboat crossing endears her to Iris, who promptly takes up residence as the Vimpanys' house guest. Hugh is not so kindly disposed towards his beloved's new friend, though whether this is because he possesses remarkable intuition or simply because he is jealous of anyone to whom Iris shows affection is not clear, and he immediately suspects that the older woman must have a disreputable past. He soon ascertains from her drunken husband that Mrs Vimpany has been a 'stage-player', and that Vimpany, for all his unpleasant habits and coarse ways, is ashamed lest his patients discover his wife's theatrical past and withdraw their custom.

When we first meet Mrs Vimpany, it is clear that she is the more malevolent partner in the marriage, with Vimpany being nothing more than her rather stupid and unreliable sidekick. Fearing that he may, in a state of drunken garrulousness, have betrayed that Lord Harry is paying her to watch Iris's every move, Mrs Vimpany decides that 'I want an opportunity [...] of telling Miss Henley that I have been wicked enough to deceive her before she finds it out for herself. I may hope she will forgive me, if I confess everything' (*BL*, Ch. VII). Her husband is understandably bemused by this reaction, as he is by her further explanation that she has grown fond of Miss Henley. The reader, however, is sceptical: Iris, as she has informed Hugh, is contributing to the Vimpanys' hospitality, and this may be a more lucrative source of income than whatever Harry is paying them.

Hugh's determination to remove Iris from their house after Vimpany has revealed the true nature of her residence is met with reluctance from both Iris, whom Hugh refrains from telling the true motive of his anxiety, and from Mrs Vimpany, who uses her dramatic training to good effect:

'Am I capable of allowing my own feelings to stand in the way, when your filial duty is concerned? Leave me, my sweet friend. Go! I entreat you, go home!'

She retired up the stage—no, no; she withdrew to the other end of the room—and burst into the most becoming of all human tears, theatrical tears. Impulsive Iris hastened to comfort the personification of self-sacrifice, the model of all that

was most unselfish in female submission. 'For shame! for shame!' she whispered, as she passed Mountjoy. (*BL*, Ch. VIII)

Typically, Iris does the opposite of what she is bidden: she determines to stay, until her next change of heart dictates otherwise. This is prompted by Vimpany's inability to carry out his wife's carefully laid scheme. Whereas she had intended to discredit Hugh in Iris's estimation by implying that it is his debauched behaviour which has corrupted her innocent husband, Vimpany oversteps the mark and accuses Hugh outright of having deliberately intoxicated him—neither of the Vimpanys nor Iris realize that there is a great deal of truth in this allegation. Mrs Vimpany is dismayed by the turn of events which she realizes <sup>5</sup>have been brought about by her own rashness in allowing her husband to foil her plans, and as a consequence:

She had exposed herself to a misfortune that she honestly dreaded—the loss of the place which she had carefully maintained in Miss Henley's estimation. In the contradictory confusion of feelings, so often found in women, this deceitful and dangerous creature had been conquered—little by little, as she herself described it—by that charm of sweetness and simplicity in Iris, of which her own depraved nature presented no trace. (*BL*, Ch. IX)

How Iris has accomplished this feat remains unknown, but fortunately for the reader, who may be concerned about the mental well-being of Collins's villainess, Mrs Vimpany appears to recover her powers of deviousness. Lord Harry arrives, and before Mrs Vimpany is able to prevent it, Iris has learnt that she is resident in the house under false pretences—a prisoner who pays her gaolers. Realizing that denial would be futile, Mrs Vimpany makes an impassioned appeal to Iris's better nature:

'When we first met—let me tell the truth at last!—I felt a malicious pleasure in deceiving you. After that time, I was surprised to find that you grew on my liking. Can you understand the wickedness that tried to resist you? It was useless; your good influence has been too strong for me. Strange, isn't it? I have lived a life of deceit, among bad people. What could you expect of me, after that? I heaped lies on lies—I would have denied that the sun was in the heavens—rather than find myself degraded in your opinion. Well! that is over—useless, quite useless now. Pray don't mistake me. I am not attempting to excuse myself; a confession was due to you; the confession is made. It is too late to hope that you will forgive me. If you will permit it, I have only one favour to ask. Forget me. (*BL*, Ch. XI)

Well-delivered, emotive, with subtle appeals to the contrariness of Iris's nature—a request to be forgotten but not forgiven must inevitably mean that Iris will forgive but not forget her—this speech would do credit to any actress, and the reader waits eagerly for Mrs Vimpany's next act of treachery. Disappointingly, it does not come: the 'sweetness and simplicity' discerned in Iris's nature by Mrs Vimpany (if not by the modern day reader) has indeed changed her.

Shortly afterwards we learn from Vimpany that:

'The fact is, my wife and I have parted company. [...] Incompatibility of temper, as the saying is, has led us to a friendly separation. Equally a relief on both sides. She goes her way, I go mine. [...] To the best of my belief, she's doing nurse's work somewhere. [...] She belongs to what they call a Sisterhood; goes about, you know, in a shabby black gown, with a poke bonnet.' (*BL*, Ch. XVI)

Iris is, of course, 'disgusted' by his manner of speaking. The reader, on the other hand, can only be left to wonder at the state of nineteenth-century religious orders which found themselves peopled by such unlikely penitents as Francine de Sor and Arabella Vimpany.

When the latter does eventually reappear, her good works have wrought a severe change for the worse in her. The villainous Mrs Vimpany may have been a little factitious, but:

Art had so cleverly improved her complexion that it almost looked like nature. Her cheeks had lost the plumpness of youth, but her hair (thanks again perhaps to Art) showed no signs of turning grey. The expression of her large dark eyes—placed perhaps a little too near her high aquiline nose—claimed admiration from any person who was so fortunate as to come within their range of view. (*BL*, Ch. III)

The exemplary Mrs Vimpany, however, represents her age:

Her artificial complexion was gone. The discarded rouge that had once overlaid her cheeks, through a long succession of years, had left the texture of the skin coarse, and had turned the colour of it to a dull yellowish tinge. Her hair, once so skilfully darkened, was now permitted to tell the truth, and revealed the sober colouring of age, in grey. The lower face had fallen away in substance; and even the penetrating brightness of her large dark eyes was a little dimmed. (*BL*, Ch. XXIV)

In fact, she would be almost unrecognizable, were it not for the fact that 'her suave grace of movement, and the deep elocutionary melody of her voice, still identified Mrs. Vimpany—disguised as she was in a dress of dull brown, shorn without mercy of the milliner's hideous improvements of the figure' (*BL*, Ch. XXIV). The reader pounces upon this last sentence—Mrs Vimpany is only *disguised* as a good woman—and his relief is palpable. She has returned, we feel sure, in the same way that Lydia Gwilt returns in *Armada*, to wreak havoc on the lives of those who have begun to place their faith in her. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and Mrs Vimpany reiterates, with total sincerity that,

[...] if I am not so bad as I once was, I owe it to that dearest and sweetest of women! But for the days that I passed in [Iris's] company, I might never have tried to atone for my past life by works of mercy. (*BL*, Ch. XXIV)

Poor Mrs Vimpany is a lost cause, and—apart from deceiving Iris, once, about the severity of her father's illness in a well-meant attempt to persuade her to return to England, and, again, about the unpleasant circumstances of Vimpany's death—she lives out the second half of the novel as the epitome of the Victorian nurse: wise, self-sacrificing, and in no doubt about her inferiority to well-mannered gentlemen such as Hugh Mountjoy.

Were it not for the new and improved Mrs Vimpany, the assassin who killed Arthur Mountjoy would have died, either from the scarlet fever through which she is nursing him, or from the vengeance of Lord Harry. Hugh, afraid of what Iris's husband will do if he ascertains the man's exact whereabouts, and the effect this will have on the woman they both love, foolishly braves the dangers of infection, and, temporarily forgetting that Arthur was his brother, warns Mrs Vimpany that 'the assassin of Arthur Mountjoy is reported to be in London; and Lord Harry has heard of it' (*BL*, Ch. XXXIII). The assassin is allowed to recover in peace, but, 'Hugh Mountjoy, stricken by the man who had murdered his brother, lay burning under the scarlet fire of the fever' (*BL*, Ch. XXXIII). No doubt feeling that it is part of the penance she must make, Mrs Vimpany also nurses Hugh through what was a frequently fatal illness. Sins as great as those of Mrs Vimpany are, however, not so easily atoned for: as if the demands made on her by this intensive nursing were not enough, she also has to suffer Iris's laments. 'Entreat Lady Harry not to write to me,' (*BL*, Ch. XXXV) begs Mrs Vimpany of the amanuensis who, to avoid infection

being passed on by letter, must write for her. Iris, predictably, puts pen to paper as soon as she receives this message: 'May I not harmlessly write to you, if I write only of my own poor self?' (*BL*, Ch. XXXV), she asks, and, indeed, of what other subject would Iris ever want to write to anyone?

When Collins introduces us to Mrs Vimpany, he introduces us to a character who is traditionally wicked: she lies and schemes; she is dangerous and devious; she is interested only in personal gain and the demonstration of her power; she is attractive but her charms are artificial. She is also, however disappointingly from a dramatic point of view, capable of undergoing some form of moral redemption. Like Mercy Merrick and even, arguably, Francine de Sor, she is capable of looking back at her past life and feeling some form of shame, repugnance, or remorse. Iris Henley, on the other hand, is not as Sir Giles pronounces her to be, 'the strangest and nicest girl in England' (*BL*, Prologue, Ch. II), or if she is, the others must be very lacking in positive qualities. Iris Henley is self-centred, self-righteous, self-justifying, and selfish. She is capable of feeling sorry that she is in a distasteful predicament, but she is utterly incapable of realizing that her own actions are to blame, and of regretting them. Iris, from Iris's point of view, is always right, and other people, who shock, horrify, disgust, and outrage her with their conduct, are always wrong. For Iris there can be no moral salvation, for that would require an acknowledgement of her own imperfections, and that she could never be persuaded to make.

In *Blind Love* Collins presents one of his most complex pattern of characters: his heroine is found wanting on many scores, whilst his villainess distinguishes herself as an angel of mercy. Once again, the binary oppositions of good/evil, noble/ignoble have been dismantled and reconstructed to fit in with Collins's own world view. The shifting perceptions of Iris's appearance, quoted above, have proven accurate. She—like most ordinary people, and unlike many fictional characters—is, as Collins promised, 'neither one thing or the other [but] a mass of contradictions.'

### III

In *The Legacy of Cain*, Collins again turns his attention both to ostensible villainesses, in the form of 'The Prisoner' who has murdered her abusive husband, and to unregenerate villainesses, of whom he provides us with three examples: Mrs Gracedieu, who despite her reputation as a kind and loving woman, sees no reason why her adopted child should not be disposed of with the same ease as she was acquired; her daughter, Helena, who, despite her religious upbringing, turns effortlessly to murder and blackmail in order to achieve her aims; and Elizabeth Chance, later Mrs Tenbruggen, who wants revenge on an innocent girl because of the crimes committed by her mother. The backdrop for the novel is the controversy surrounding the nineteenth-century belief in the genetic transference of evil from one generation to the next.

The idea of the hereditary transmission of moral and immoral qualities was one which had preoccupied intellectuals from the start of the nineteenth-century. Although T. J. Graham, in 1853, issued a warning to the middle classes to be careful in their choice of spouse, as 'it is only by attending to the law of selection, that the organization and qualities of offspring can be improved [and] the disastrous consequences of improper intermarriages [...] avoided,'<sup>17</sup> it was the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection* some six years later that caused evolutionary ideas to be widely discussed in other than scientific and philosophical spheres.<sup>18</sup> Informed in part by Darwin's later work, *The Descent of Man* (1871),<sup>19</sup> received wisdom in the 1880s maintained that criminals, destitutes, lunatics, and other socially undesirables

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<sup>17</sup> T. J. Graham, *On the Management and Disorders of Infancy and Childhood* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1853); quoted in Sally Shuttleworth, 'Demonic Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era', in *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender*, ed. by Linda M. Shires, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 31-51 (p. 36).

<sup>18</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (London: John Murray, 1859).

<sup>19</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (London: John Murray, 1871).

would, according to the laws of evolution, ultimately lose their fight for survival and become extinct.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the view prevailed that there was a greater tendency towards the transmission, from parents to their children, of infirmities—mental, moral, and physical—than of strengths. It is this latter belief that Collins chooses to challenge in *The Legacy of Cain*.

The story revolves around the two daughters of the Reverend Abel Gracedieu. Helena, the younger of the two, is the minister's own child, whilst her sister, Eunice, is the daughter of a convicted murderess, whom the minister adopted when she was still a baby. Other than the Reverend Gracedieu, only his wife, the Prison Governor, the Doctor, the Prison Chaplain, and Elizabeth Chance, the woman given the task of caring for the murderess's daughter at the time of the execution, know that the adoption took place. The girls themselves are unaware, not only that one of them is adopted, but also which of them is the elder.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the reader himself is not fully enlightened as to the exact identities of the girls until halfway through the novel, although, if he is in any measure familiar with the workings of Collins's imagination, he will inevitably have drawn his own conclusions by this time.

Sororial harmony seems to reign in the Gracedieu household, until both girls fall in love with the rather uninspiring Philip Dunboyne. When Helena discovers that, in spite of her superior looks and intelligence, she is incapable of sustaining Philip's devotion, she decides that the most fitting course of action will be firstly to kill him, and secondly to make it appear that Eunice has performed the evil deed. Her plan, of course, fails, and she

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<sup>20</sup> These ideas are expounded more fully in Shuttleworth, 'Demonic Mothers' (see above); Beer, *Darwin's Plots*; Peckham, 'Darwinism and Darwinisticism', *Victorian Studies*, 3 (1959), 19-40; and Taylor, 'Wilkie Collins and Nineteenth-Century Psychology'.

<sup>21</sup> Critics, both contemporary and modern, have found this an unpalatable element of the novel. J. A. Noble, in 1889, in an unsigned review in the *Spectator*, objected that: 'Mr Gracedieu's extraordinary scheme of bringing up the two girls who are supposed to be sisters in ignorance of their respective ages was not merely impracticable in itself—as the elder would naturally remember the infancy of the younger—but was calculated to defeat the very end it was intended to serve by suggesting to some curious person that something was being concealed' (*Spectator*, 62 (1889), 120; quoted in Page, p. 221), whilst more recently, Catherine Peters complains that 'the reader is expected to swallow [such an] absurd idea' (p. 425).

is sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Eunice, meanwhile, after a series of delays caused initially by her fear that she, and by extension, her husband, will be forever stigmatized by having a would-be murderess for a sister, and subsequently by the death of Mr Dunboyne Senior, is finally able to become Philip's wife. The eventual discovery that, although none of Helena's malevolent blood runs in Eunice's veins, she must nevertheless face the consequences of having a wholly successful murderess for a mother, is met with surprising insouciance by both Eunice and Philip, who nonchalantly retire to a life of domestic bliss on the Dunboyne estate in Ireland.

The novel ends, however, not on this conventional note, with the good prospering on the Emerald Isle and the wicked languishing in gaol, but with Helena's phoenix-like resurrection after her release from prison as 'The Reverend Miss Gracedieu', distinguished leader of an American feminist religious cult, and author of a highly successful book of Orations, now into its tenth edition.

Typically, when Collins decided to engage with theories of heredity, he was not content to challenge the dominant beliefs by merely inverting them: angelic parents with evil children and wicked parents with saintly offspring would be too simple a variation on a theme. Instead, he chose to show that even those whom society may regard as 'good', for the simple reason that they commit no crime in the eyes of the law, may be as genetically polluting as those whom society has labelled 'bad'. Equally, in Collins's philosophy, a failure to adhere to society's norms or to uphold its legal requirements is not an indication of a degenerate nature, nor does it have negative implications for future generations. Evil, like goodness, may manifest itself regardless of genetic history, of environment, or of necessity, and speculation about an individual's future based solely on such flimsy material can only lead to trouble. As the ultimately enlightened Prison Governor recognizes:

Here, the doctrine of hereditary transmission of moral qualities must own that it has overlooked the fertility (for growth of good and for growth of evil equally) which is inherent in human nature. There are virtues that exalt us, and vices that degrade us, whose mysterious origin is, not in our parents, but in ourselves. (*LC, Postscript*)



*The Legacy of Cain* is a clever novel, in that its challenge to orthodox prejudices and beliefs is at once subtle and multi-layered. The result of Collins's investigation into hereditary or learned vice is deliberately unclear, as Collins wishes us to understand that the complexities of the human mind cannot be subject to such a facile analysis. In a letter to his publisher, Collins expressed the fear that he might have 'aimed over the heads of the present generation of novel-readers.'<sup>22</sup> Certainly his argument is considerably above the heads, several generations later, of William Marshall and Sue Lonoff. '*The Legacy of Cain*, [betrays] the unhappy evidence of Collins' confusion about the implications of propositions concerning evolution,' complains Marshall, betraying the unhappy evidence of his own confusion about the implications of Collins's novel, whilst Lonoff, equally confused, finds the book 'simplistic' and 'preposterous', and concludes, simplistically and preposterously, that at the time of writing *The Legacy of Cain*, it would seem that '[Collins], like his minister, was suffering from incipient senility.'<sup>23</sup>

The 'First Period' of the novel centres on the days preceding the execution of Eunice's mother for the murder of her husband. Whilst the re-emergence of these murderous genes in the daughter is, throughout the novel, a constant threat to those who surround her, it is clear that, from Collins's own standpoint, no such menace is ever present. These first events are narrated by the Prison Governor, who, upon his first appearance, rather than being an impartial observer or a mouthpiece for Collins himself, merely echoes the

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<sup>22</sup> Letter to Andrew Chatto, 7/12/1888, Parrish collection; quoted in Peters, p. 425.

<sup>23</sup> Marshall, p. 106; Lonoff, p. 169. Lonoff's reading of Collins's later novels, as I have shown elsewhere, frequently reveals not only bizarre conclusions, to which, of course, any writer is entitled, but also a surprising number of curious factual inaccuracies. In the case of *The Legacy of Cain*, her assertion that there are 'three alternating narrators (two sisters who record their impressions in their diaries and an older man who seems to speak directly to the reader)' completely ignores the contribution to the narrative of Miss Jillgall, to whom Lonoff dismissively refers, some pages later, as 'a comical old maid' (pp. 128, 168).

contemporary view that a persecuted wife deserved her misery.<sup>24</sup> He maintains that the husband, by virtue of being 'a gentleman by birth and education,' who had married 'a woman in an inferior rank of life,' deserves 'some tribute of regret,' even though:

It is not to be denied that he was profligate in his habits and violent in his temper. But it is equally true that he was affectionate in the domestic circle, and, when moved by wisely-applied remonstrance, sincerely penitent for sins committed under temptation that overpowered him. If his wife had killed him in a fit of jealous rage—under provocation, be it remembered, which the witness proved—she might have received a light sentence. But the evidence so undeniably revealed deliberate and merciless premeditation, that [...] the only alternative left to a righteous jury was a verdict which condemned the woman to death. Those mischievous members of the community, whose topsy-turvy sympathies feel for the living criminal and forget the dead victim, attempted to save her by means of highflown petitions and contemptible correspondence in newspapers. But the Judge held firm; and the Home Secretary held firm. They were entirely right; and the public were scandalously wrong. (*LC*, Chapter II)

Faced with a drunken, bullying husband, and no legal means of escaping from his power, the poor woman has, as did Hester Detheridge before her, resorted to murder as the only way to ensure not only her own safety, but also that of her infant daughter. Her conviction is, however, every bit as premeditated as her crime, and the righteous, and male, jury would surely have disbelieved whatever proof of provocation the witness may have attempted to offer. Her refusal to repent until the Minister has undertaken to adopt her child, further damns her in the eyes of the conservative Governor, who no doubt adds coercion to the list of her sins. It is, however, much less the act of a manipulative

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<sup>24</sup> In 1877, for example, Edward Cox, court recorder and magistrate, published an influential handbook on sentencing, *Principles of Punishment as Applied in the Administration of Criminal Law by Judges and Magistrates* (London: Law Times Office, 1877), in which he states that the abused wife is usually:

[...] an angel of the fallen class, who has made her husband's home an earthly hell, who spends his earnings in drink, pawns his furniture, starves her children, provides for him no meal, lashes him with her tongue when sober and with her fists when drunk, and if he tries to restrain her fits of passion, resists with a fierceness and strength for which he is no match. He is labouring all day to feed and clothe her and his children and when he returns home at night this is his greeting. The law gives him no redress, no help. He cannot send her away—he cannot obtain a divorce. He is tortured and taunted to the verge of madness. He drinks to drown care. In his cups he vows vengeance, and excited by liquor he assumes unwonted courage, he commands obedience, he threatens punishment, she resists, there is a struggle, he to maintain his authority, she defying it; he for once has the best of it. (pp. 101-02; quoted in Doggert, p. 124).

criminal, than the final hope of a desperate woman. Having maintained a façade of cold indifference, when the Minister accedes to her demands, she is suddenly in danger of weakening: 'The relief to her tortured spirit expressed itself horribly in a burst of frantic laughter. "I can't help it," she gasped; "I'm so happy"' (LC, Ch. VII). Her request that her face remain covered even after her execution is regarded—incorrectly, I would argue—by the Doctor as evidence of overweening 'self-esteem' (LC, Ch. VII), and by Keith Reierstad as 'vanity';<sup>25</sup> rather, it is further evidence of her increasing inability to maintain control of her emotions.<sup>26</sup> As the Doctor observes, "'The Prisoner will face the crowd round the scaffold with composure; and the people will say, 'She died game'" (LC, Ch. VII), which, in her ignorance of the deception which will be practised by the honest Minister, is exactly the myth she wishes to be passed down to her daughter.

Dr Henry Maudsley, whom Elaine Showalter describes as 'the intellectual leader of the Darwinian group in English psychiatry,'<sup>27</sup> considered that inherited tendencies descended 'more often from the mother than the father, and from the mother to the daughters more often than to the sons.'<sup>28</sup> If this view of hereditary transmission is to be believed, then,

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<sup>25</sup> Reierstad, p. 458.

<sup>26</sup> The masking of prisoners was, in fact, quite frequent in prisons in the mid-nineteenth century, and Collins is merely exaggerating a common practice. According to W. J. Forsythe:

Between 1830 and 1850 there was advanced a model of prison discipline based upon [a] desire for moral and spiritual reclamation of the individual prisoner. The aim was to isolate prisoners from each other in separate cells, place them in separate cubicles in chapel, mask them whenever they moved from one part of the prison [...] It was intended by this method that prisoners so isolated would be forced in upon themselves and that they would hear at last the voices of conscience and religion. [...] So, in place of reckless self-seeking criminality there would be created a humble repentant thirst for atonement with God through Christ, a true and permanent reformation of attitude and conduct. (*Penal Discipline, Reformatory Projects, and the English Prison Commission, 1895-1939* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991), p. 8)

If atonement with God is to be achieved by the covering of the face, it is certainly odd that the Prison Governor, the Chaplain and the Doctor should regard the Prisoner's request with such distaste: after all, their endeavours have been dedicated solely to obtaining the Prisoner's repentance.

<sup>27</sup> Elaine Showalter, 'Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Fiction of the Fin de Siècle', in *Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by Ruth Bernard Yeazell Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1983-84 (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 88-115 (p. 90).

<sup>28</sup> Dr Henry Maudsley, *The Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* (London: Macmillan, 1867), p. 216.

Eunice should develop not murderous propensities, but the ability to care about another person's fate more than her own, the single-mindedness to do whatever may be expedient to ensure that person's well-being, and the resolution to uphold her own principles, whatever they may be. Should Eunice be one of Maudsley's rare cases, where paternal transmission be dominant, however, then there is a real danger that she may show an inclination towards reckless extravagance, insincere repentance, and strong drink.

Helena's mother, on the other hand, is shown to possess very few sterling qualities for her daughter to inherit. Despite the Chaplain's initial assessment of her as 'a lady universally respected' (*LC*, Ch. II), she rapidly proves him to be as poor a judge of character as her own husband, the Reverend Abel Gracedieu. Collins's description of her 'singularly narrow and slanting forehead [and] the flashing shifting expression in her eyes' (*LC*, Ch. IX) immediately suggests some form of abnormality. She is, in physiognomical terms, akin to Charlotte Brontë's Madame Beck and Anthony Trollope's Lady Mason who, as Jeanne Fahnestock points out, 'have the high, narrow foreheads of perspicacity without the breadth of moral knowledge,'<sup>29</sup> and her bright, restive glance indicates a deceitful or cunning nature.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, these negative impressions are soon reinforced as we learn what her purpose is in visiting the Prison Governor. Having now had a child of her own, she wishes to enlist the Governor's assistance in placing her adopted daughter in an orphan asylum: "What a relief it will be to get rid of that child!" (*LC*, Ch. IX) she exclaims, betraying an unmistakable lack of Christian charity. That her husband had promised to care for the child as his own, and sworn to save her from such a fate as that now envisaged for her, is of no consequence to Mrs Gracedieu: "I can tell him [...] that the hateful child will be placed in competent and kindly hands—and I have my own sweet baby to plead for me. With these advantages in my favour, do you actually suppose I can fail to make *my* way of thinking *his* way of thinking?" (*LC*, Ch. IX). The poor,

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<sup>29</sup> Fahnestock, p. 347.

<sup>30</sup> Collins's brother, Charley, himself an amateur of physiognomy as well as an artist of some renown, published an article in which he discusses the interpretation of character from the set and mobility of the eye (Charles Allston Collins, 'On the Expression of the Eye', *Macmillan's*, 14 (1866), 357-63).

deluded Minister, however, has no idea that his way of thinking does not correspond with that of his wife, and writes glowingly to the Governor that

‘You have no idea what treasures of virtue and treasures of beauty, maternity has revealed in my wife’s sweet nature. Other mothers, in her proud position, might find their love cooling towards the poor child whom we have adopted. But my household is irradiated by the presence of an angel, who gives an equal share in her affections to the two little ones alike.’ (*LC*, Ch. X)

Fortunately for all concerned, Mrs Gracedieu, who has for some time suffered from a heart complaint, dies before her husband realizes that his philosophy is not compatible with hers, and before their ‘hateful’ adopted daughter can be placed in a charitable institution.<sup>31</sup>

Helena, Mrs Gracedieu’s ‘own sweet baby’, may not inherit murderous tendencies from her mother—although we do not know to what depths this pillar of society would not have sunk had her plans to re-educate her husband failed—but believers in heredity can certainly expect her to show signs of hypocrisy, malice, and duplicity. Her father, the well-meaning Minister, at this stage, appears only to have kind qualities, and possibly a certain ingenuousness, to pass on to his daughter. Later, however, when the burden of secrecy which he has imposed upon himself becomes too much for his enfeebled mind, he shows himself prone to attacks not only of jealousy, but also of murderous rage. This, is not revealed however, until two-thirds of the way through the novel, by which time we know that Eunice is the adopted child and Helena the evil one, and the pursuit of discerning inherited characteristics has long ceased to entertain us.

The female characters in the first generation of the story, then, are two mothers, both of whom love their own child deeply, one of whom has, in desperation, killed her husband, while the other has felt no such need, knowing that she can not only make her husband

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<sup>31</sup> Mrs Gracedieu’s attitude towards her adopted child is in sharp contrast with that of the invalid Mrs Blyth, in *Hide and Seek*, who ‘from the day when little Mary first appeared at her bedside, [...] felt to use her own expression, as if a new strength had been given to her to enjoy her new happiness’ (London: Richard Bentley, 1854; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Bk 1, Ch. VII.

*do*, but even *think*, as she wishes. To respectable middle-class Victorians, however, it was the daughter of the murderess who must surely have been expected to bear the hereditary taint. Indeed, even Dougald MacEachen blithely assumes that Eunice 'has inherited evil moral tendencies from her mother,' and it is only the wholesome environment of the Minister's home which enables her to grow up into 'a model young woman.'<sup>32</sup> Eunice, then, is good, kind, and not particularly intelligent. It is true that she is, after Helena has stolen Philip's affections, occasionally visited by a supernatural voice which claims to be that of her mother, and which suggests that she might like to kill Helena with an ornamental knife or some conveniently situated yew berries, but her horrified reaction to these suggestions seems to belie the idea of her having inherited such savage propensities. Helena, of course, needs no ghostly manifestations to spur her on to murderous acts. As Keith Reierstad asserts, 'Helena is quite simply evil.'<sup>33</sup>

In Helena, Collins creates his perhaps most consummate villainess since Lydia Gwilt in *Armada*. Whereas his other wicked creatures have had some, however misguided, motivation for their malevolent deeds—financial gain, protection of a loved one, vengeance on a perceived enemy—Helena Gracedieu is evil primarily because being evil gives her pleasure, because she cannot resist 'the splendid fascinations of crime' (*LC*, Ch. XXV).

Her true nature, however, does not become fully apparent until she meets the hapless Philip Dunboyne, who is already romantically attached to her sister Eunice. Until this point, she has been only slightly unpleasant, and certainly not beyond redemption. At this stage, the reader has not yet discovered that she is the real daughter of the Minister and his wife, and many of her early utterances are designed more for obfuscation than for character delineation. When the Minister succumbs a second time to welcoming a homeless, friendless individual—this time in the form of his destitute cousin, the

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<sup>32</sup> MacEachen, 'Victorian Crusader', p. 161.

<sup>33</sup> Reierstad, p. 452.

curiously named Selina Jillgall—into the family home, Helena views the new arrangement with horror and revulsion. Having made her feelings plain, she briefly wishes she had inherited her father's sweet temper, before locking herself in her room where 'I stamped on the floor, I clenched my fists, I cast myself on the bed, I reviled that hateful woman by every hard word I could throw at her. Oh, the luxury of it! the luxury of it!' (*LC*, Ch. XIV). The conclusion the reader is inclined to draw is that, as Helena has not inherited her father's temper, she must, therefore, be the adopted child, and her reluctance to show the same charity that was shown to her seems a pleasingly ironic twist. With hindsight, however, we know that Helena is the Minister's own child, and whilst she may have failed to inherit his kind nature, she seems most certainly to have inherited her mother's prejudice against familial interlopers. Even her use of the adjective 'hateful' recalls Mrs Gracedieu's opinion of the infant Eunice. Physically, too, she resembles her late mother. The Governor, describing his first meeting with Helena, says:

Miss Helena recalled to me her mother's face, infinitely improved by youth and health, and by a natural beauty which that cruel and deceitful woman could never have possessed. The slanting forehead and the shifting flashing eyes, that I recollected in the parent, were reproduced (slightly reproduced, I ought to say) in the child. As for the other features, I had never seen a more beautiful nose and mouth, or a more delicately-shaped outline, than was presented by the lower part of the face. But Miss Helena somehow failed to charm me. (*LC*, Ch. XXXII)

According to Fahnestock, 'the careful details in [nineteenth-century] descriptions and scenes tell more than the twentieth-century reader often realizes.'<sup>34</sup> Indeed, from the point of view of the physiognomically obsessed Victorians, this passage implies that Helena, despite indications to the contrary, must possess at least some noble and commendable qualities. The eighteenth-century Swiss clergyman, Johann Kaspar Lavater, who dedicated his life to the study and promotion of physiognomy as a science, considered that 'the strongest, highest, and most perfect expression of character' was to be found in the nose, and it was generally agreed that a beautiful mouth and delicate chin

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<sup>34</sup> Fahnestock, p. 340.

revealed a pleasingly feminine want of determination in their possessor.<sup>35</sup> In his characterization of Helena, Collins clearly refutes these notions of externalized representations of personality, not, I would argue, because he does not understand them, but because he prefers to challenge all forms of assumed, but unproven, wisdom. Just as he wishes to illustrate the folly of prejudice against an individual because of the suspectedly inherited sins of his forefathers, he also wishes to show the injustice of discrimination against, or bias towards, one whose facial features chance to vary from, or conform to, an accepted pattern. As the Governor finally admits, 'it was weak indeed to compare the mean vices of Mrs Gracedieu with the diabolical depravity of her daughter' (*LC*, Postscript).

Helena, vain and conceited, first notices Philip when she hears him comment favourably on her appearance at a railway station. She cannot help but admire his excellent taste, although is less than pleased to learn of his involvement with her sister. Unperturbed, however, she comforts herself with the thought that he has only fallen for Eunice because he met her first, and magnanimously forgiving him such a terrible *faux pas*, determines to win him for herself. With some satisfaction, she remarks 'My fatal passion for Philip promises to be the utter destruction of everything that is good in me [...] There is a fate in these things. If I am destined to rob Eunice of the one dear object of her love and hope—how can I resist?' (*LC*, Ch. XXV), and goes on to extol the merits of reading—strictly against her father's wishes—French novels, which, she explains:

[...] opened to me a new world inhabited entirely by unrepentant people; the magnificent women diabolically beautiful; the satanic men dead to every sense of virtue, and alive—perhaps rather dirtily alive—to the splendid fascinations of crime. I know now that Love is above everything but itself. Love is the one law that we are bound to obey. How deep! how consoling! how admirably true! (*LC*, Ch. XXV)<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> John Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy: For the Promotion of the Knowledge and Love of Mankind*, trans. by Thomas Holcroft, (London: Whittingham, 1804), III, pp. 185-86.

<sup>36</sup> Apart from the seemingly fictional *L'Ame damnée*, to which she admits reading, it could also, given her rather contrived fatalism, be concluded that one of the scurrilous French novels from which Helena has gained such consolation is Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Liaisons*



This last sentiment, despite coming from Helena's pen, is perhaps Collins's own, but he has bestowed it upon the one character in his novel who is totally incapable of feeling that elevated—and elevating—emotion. The corruptive influence of this reading matter would have come as no surprise to Collins's contemporary readers. As Patrick Brantlinger points out, novels and novel reading were viewed not only as symptomatic of, but also as causing, 'mind rot and moral decay' among nineteenth-century readers; and Collins, along with Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Gissing, and many other novelists shared their audiences' anxiety concerning the negative consequences of such reading.<sup>37</sup> Helena's reading does not, however, help her to understand the nature of her obsession with Philip:

What, I ask myself, has fed the new flame which is burning in me? Did it begin with gratified pride? [...] Or, has the growth of this masterful feeling been encouraged by the envy and jealousy stirred in me, when I found Eunice (my inferior in every respect) distinguished by the devotion of a handsome lover, and

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*dangereuses* (Nantes: [n.pub.], 1787; repr. Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1961), in which the villainess's advice on how to rid oneself of a tiresome lover is to send an exculpatory letter explaining that:

On s'ennuie de tout, mon Ange, c'est une loi de la Nature; ce n'est pas ma faute [...] Depuis quelque temps je t'ai trompée: mais aussi, ton impitoyable tendresse m'y forçait en quelque sorte! Ce n'est pas ma faute. Aujourd'hui, une femme que j'aime éperdument exige que je te sacrifie. Ce n'est pas ma faute [...] Adieu, mon Ange, je t'ai prise avec plaisir, je te quitte sans regrette [...] Ainsi va le monde. Ce n'est pas ma faute. (Letter CXLI)

There is a certain irony in the fact that when the tables are turned, and the attitude displayed by Philip is the one recommended in this letter, Helena no longer regards it as nearly so deep or so consoling.

Further evidence of Helena's reading of Laclos is her answer to her own inquiry, 'When a girl is devoured by deadly hatred of a man, does the feeling show itself to other persons in her face? I must practise before the glass, and train my face into a trustworthy state of discipline' (LC, Ch. LVII), which recalls the Marquise de Meurteil's reminiscences about her own training in self-discipline:

Entrée dans le monde dans le temps où, fille encore, j'étais vouée par état au silence et à l'inaction, j'ai su en profiter pour observer et réfléchir [...] Forcé souvent de cacher les objets de mon attention aux yeux qui m'entouraient, j'essayai de guider les miens à mon gré; j'obtins dès lors de prendre à volonté ce regard distrait que depuis vous avez loué si souvent [...] Ressentais-je quelque chagrin, je m'étudais à prendre l'air de la sécurité, même celui de la joie; j'ai porté le zèle jusqu'à me causer des douleurs volontaires, pour chercher pendant ce temps l'expression du plaisir. (Letter LXXXI)

<sup>37</sup> *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 54, 57. See also Mark Spilka, 'On the Enrichment of Poor Monkeys by Myth and Dream; or, How Dickens Pre-Freudianized Victorian Views of Childhood', in *Sexuality and Victorian Literature*, ed. by Don Richard Cox, (Knoxville, Ten.: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), pp. 161-79.

having a brilliant marriage in view—while I was left neglected, with no prospect of changing my title from Miss to Mrs? (*LC*, Ch. XXV)

The first two points she raises may well have contributed, in part, to her fervour; the third point, however, seems somewhat improbable. The murderess's child is a year old when the story opens in 1858, and the Minister's daughter is born approximately one year later. Helena, then, at the time of writing in 1875, is either eighteen, or, as we shall soon ascertain, sixteen years of age when the prospect of remaining an old maid so distresses her. A similar terror afflicts Caroline Helstone in *Shirley*, although according to the marriage manuals of the era, the ideal age for marriage was considered to be between twenty and twenty-five for women and between twenty-three and twenty-eight for men, and, as Pat Jalland has shown, in the 1870s both sexes tended to marry somewhat later than was recommended.<sup>38</sup>

Although wholly evil from the point of view of both the reader and her fellow characters, Helena is not such an atypical Collinsian villainess. In the eyes of other people, she may have none of the redeeming features which usually mitigate the evil deeds of her creator's other wicked characters, but, in her own eyes, she varies from being the epitome of all that is bad—'In the length and breadth of England, I doubt if there is a much more wicked young woman to be found than myself' (*LC*, Ch. XXV)—to being a model of moral rectitude and magnanimity, who is victimized and maligned by those around her. This sense of abuse leads certainly to paranoia, and almost to schizophrenia. Both conditions are discernible when Helena commands the Governor to her presence. His reluctance to participate in this meeting is graciously excused:

'Do you really think I don't know that Miss Jillgall has been telling you everything that is bad about me; putting every mistake that I have made, every fault that I have committed, in the worst possible point of view? And you have listened to her—quite naturally! And you are prejudiced, strongly prejudiced, against me—what else could you be, under the circumstances? I don't complain.' (*LC*, Ch. XXXVII)

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<sup>38</sup> Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage, and Politics, 1860-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 79.

The Governor, then, has been misled, but Helena has the benevolence to overlook his folly: she finds it quite proper that the Governor should be shocked lest “feelings of enmity exist between near relations; and you wish to be assured that I bear no malice towards Eunice. She is violent, she is sulky, she is stupid, she is selfish; and she cruelly refuses to live in the same house as me. Make your mind easy, sir, I forgive my sister” (*LC*, Ch. XXXVII).

Despite Helena’s explanation that she and Philip “are the victims of an accident, which kept us apart when we ought to have met together—we are not responsible for an accident” (*LC*, Ch. XXXVII), the Governor remains hostile to her cause. He views with horror the ‘strong conviction of her own virtue [which] stared at me in her proud and daring eyes’ (*LC*, Ch. XXXVII), and makes clear to her, just as some sixteen years previously he had made clear to her mother, that he will not intercede with the Minister on her behalf. By refusing to take her part, and by writing, on the Minister’s instructions, a letter to Philip’s father, to prevent the marriage, the Governor has, Helena feels, declared himself her enemy, and as such, must be vanquished. Having previously provoked him into revealing that he had known her mother, she now has the perfect weapon of retribution. The revelation to the Minister of a secret connexion between his adored wife and his friend the Governor will do as much toward destroying her father’s already tenuous grip on his sanity as it will to discrediting the Governor, but this is of small consequence to Helena.<sup>39</sup>

Equally, her discovery that Philip now holds her in contempt, is not a situation which can be lightly borne. It is clear to her that, between them, Philip and Eunice have, albeit unwittingly, connived to humiliate her: they, not she, are the wrong-doers, and what possible recourse can she have but to poison Philip, and, when suspicion falls on her, to

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<sup>39</sup> The dead mother as an idealized figure was fundamental to the Victorians’ ideas of origins, and later becomes the central figure of Freudian psychoanalysis. Helena’s desecration of this icon, despite the unpleasant attributes of the original, must surely indicate the degree to which her familial alienation has progressed. For a fuller discussion of the dead mother see Carolyn Dever, *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

redirect it on to Eunice? 'Am I a woman who submits when an outrage is offered to her?' (LC, Ch. LV), she asks. From her point of view, then—she no longer comments on her own wickedness, feeling herself now the aggrieved party—retaliation is no crime, and her subsequent imprisonment is, as the illustrated newspaper received by Miss Jillgall from America proclaims, 'a shocking miscarriage of justice' (LC, Postscript).

James Cowles Pritchard, in his *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind*, observed that 'madmen do not appear to have lost the faculty of reasoning; but having joined some ideas together very wrongly, they mistake them for truths, and they err, as men do that argue right from wrong principles.' Helena is, then, not merely villainous, she is also deluded, arguably to the point of insanity, or to what Pritchard refers to as monomania, 'in which the understanding is partially disordered or under the influence of some particular delusion, referring to one subject, and involving one train of ideas, while the intellectual powers appear, when exercised on other subjects, to be altogether unimpaired.'<sup>40</sup> Monomaniacs could, however, recover their sanity if they were able not only to recognize the madness which had possessed them but also to exercise sufficient self-control to overcome it. Helena, unfortunately, is unwilling or unable to perform either of these feats. Her eventual destiny—leader of a feminist cult in the United States—recalls that of Eliza Nottridge, recorded by John Connolly, a friend of Dickens. Despite having no murderous compulsions against which to struggle, she established herself in a quasi-religious community known as the 'Abode of Love', in which 'a mock religion and a boundless fanaticism sanction modes of worship which tend to destroy all sense of modesty,' thereby demonstrating what Connolly, regarded as the dangers of 'leaving imbecile, visionary and fanatical women at large.'<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> James Cowles Pritchard, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (1835), pp. 3, 6; quoted in Taylor, p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> John Connolly, *Indications of Insanity: The Treatment of the Insane Without Mechanical Restraint* (1856), ed. by R. Hunter and I. MacAlpine, Introduction, p. xc; quoted in Taylor, p. 41.

One of the criticisms which has been levelled against Collins's fanatical villainess in this novel is the implausibility that one so cunning should be so gullible as to share with the obviously untrustworthy Mrs Tenbruggen the secrets of her diary.<sup>42</sup> Certainly betraying her great admiration for a woman who has attempted to poison her mother-in-law is rash, but it must be remembered, firstly, that Helena is still only contemplating the adoption of this woman's *modus operandi*; secondly, that Helena is little more than a child, and must surely be excused for taking a childish pride in revealing to her mentor what she sees as her own cleverness; and thirdly, that Mrs Tenbruggen is an infinitely more talented manipulator than her *protégée*.

Before her marriage to Mr Tenbruggen, 'a Dutch gentleman of high family' (LC, Ch. X), Elizabeth Chance was the mistress of Eunice's real father. So incensed is she by his murder—although whether this is because she has lost the man she loved, or lost the comfortable life he provided, is not made clear—that she swears vengeance upon his infant daughter, who, in her eyes, is his wife's representative. Nevertheless, Mrs Tenbruggen is content to be malicious, not murderous. She simply wishes to expose Eunice as the daughter of a murderess, and thus ruin her marriage prospects. If she can impose miserable lives upon her victims, she has no need to inflict death upon them. Moreover, unlike Helena, she has learnt that doing good can be as much to her benefit as doing evil, and, in her villainy, she even possesses some moral scruples. Although guided by revenge, she raises the subscription needed to enable the penniless Miss Jillgall, whom she knows to be the Minister's cousin, to return safely to England. As a masseuse, or 'Medical Rubber', she brings relief to her patients, whilst earning more money than she needs, and, with two elderly and infirm enemies in need of her services, furthering her devious intention. It is to this profession that she returns when her schemes to destroy Eunice's happiness have come to nothing. In addition, whilst a totally depraved person

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<sup>42</sup> Reierstad, p. 453. A more valid criticism of Helena's inconsistency would be to ask why a girl, who, in order to discover her betrothed's intentions, pursues him in a hired cab, colludes with disreputable coachmen, crouches behind hedges, and risks being savaged by fierce guard dogs, should blithely accept that she has no idea whether she or her sister is the Minister's older daughter.

would, for expediency's sake, simply avenge herself on both of the Minister's daughters, Mrs Tenbruggen goes to considerable lengths to establish which girl is which. Her interest is in the older girl, but neither Eunice nor Helena can enlighten her. The portrait of Helena's mother, which would have revealed the likeness, has been destroyed by the Minister in the jealous rage provoked by his daughter's revelation regarding the Governor and Mrs Gracedieu. Her attempts to charm the Governor, and to mesmerize the Minister, into revealing the information also prove fruitless. Ultimately, she resorts to hereditary characteristics and nomenclature to help her guess the answer to the riddle:

'Helena is plainly the wicked one of the two [...] I saw it, and felt it, before I had been five minutes in her company. [...] In the second place, though it is very slight, there is a certain something in her hair and her complexion which reminds me of the murderess: there is no other resemblance, I admit. In the third place, the girls' names point to the same conclusion. Mr Gracedieu is a Protestant. Would he call a child of his own by the name of a Roman Catholic saint? No! he would prefer a name in the Bible; Eunice is *his* child. And Helena was once the baby whom I carried into the prison. Do you deny that?' (LC, Ch. LI)

The Governor does not deny it, and thus Mrs Tenbruggen is allowed, at least temporarily, to labour under a misapprehension of her own devising. Again, Collins is reiterating his view that it is unwise to place too much faith in heredity, or, indeed, in assumption: we already know that 'Eunice' was the Minister's choice of name, and 'Helena' his wife's, after her late mother.<sup>43</sup>

Although Collins shows himself to be sceptical about physiognomy in his portrait of Helena, he seems initially to adhere much more closely, and overtly, to its conventions in his description of Mrs Tenbruggen. Her first appearance, as the child's nurse, is recounted by the Governor:

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<sup>43</sup> The girls names are, however, significant, although not in the way Mrs Tenbruggen assumes: Eunice, from the Greek *Eunike*, means 'good victory', and, to the extent that she is allowed to marry the man of her choice, we must assume that her winning Philip away from her evil sister constitutes a 'good victory;' Helena, the Latin form of the Greek *Helene*, means 'bright', and certainly she is the more physically attractive and intelligent sister. In the Bible, Eunice, the mother of Timothy, is mentioned by Paul as one link in a chain of hereditary faith, thus recalling the novel's central theme (2 Tim i.5). Helena, in her relationship with Philip, evokes a (distorted) parallel with Helen of Troy, whose seduction by Paris led to the Trojan war.

Youth and a fine complexion, a well-made figure and a natural grace of movement—these were her personal attractions, so far as I could see. Her defects were, to my mind, equally noticeable. Under a heavy forehead, her piercing eyes looked at persons and things with an expression which was not to my taste. Her large mouth—another defect in my opinion—would have been recommended to mercy, in the estimation of many men, by her magnificent teeth; white, well shaped, cruelly regular. Believers in physiognomy might perhaps have seen the betrayal of an obstinate nature in the lengthy firmness of her chin. (*LC*, Ch. V)

Believers in physiognomy would also have discerned a voluptuous sensuality in her mouth, and a sinister intelligence in her forehead, both of which qualities are attested to by our knowledge of her relationship with a married man, and her determination to pursue his daughter for her own satisfaction. By the time she is actively involved in this pursuit, she has lost the few personal attractions she once possessed, suggesting an almost total decline into depravity. Her appearance, some seventeen years after the Governor's first assessment of her, reveals the ravages of time and vice. The Governor now observes that:

There was something in the expression of her eyes which seemed to be familiar to me. But the effort of my memory was not helped by what I observed in the other parts of her face. The iron-grey hair, the baggy lower eyelids, the fat cheeks, the coarse complexion, and the double chin, were features, and very disagreeable features too, which I had never seen at any former time. (*LC*, Ch. XLVI)

Collins's suggestion that it is possible to develop hitherto undetected facial characteristics, whether 'disagreeable' or otherwise, is, no doubt, a challenge to those previously invoked 'believers in physiognomy' who wished to establish their subject as an exact science.

Once more, then, in *The Legacy of Cain* Collins presents his readers with a series of female characters—whether murderous or merely vindictive, in deed or merely in thought—whose good or wicked propensities are set at odds with superficial appearances. His thought-provoking use of heredity and physiognomy, both subjects of topical interest to his contemporary readers, not only supports his contention that what we see is not always what we get, but also shows a sceptical view of placing excessive faith in a structure of values and rules which offers minuteness of definition and apparent overall life guidance, but is in fact demonstrably specious and ridiculous.

## IV

As Lisa Hamilton has shown, 'the habit of "reading" the human body as an accurate map of the soul, the moral character, and the intellectual capacity, is of central importance to the nineteenth-century novel [...] This assumption of legibility is important in understanding the narrative trajectory of the Victorian novel, since for many of the characters, description encodes destiny.'<sup>44</sup> Mme Fontaine, the Jezebel in *Jezebel's Daughter* certainly achieves the sinister potential suggested by at least the part of her physical description relating to the upper areas of her face. One of the most memorable and important scenes in the novel is Mme Fontaine's first appearance, described here by the narrator, David Glenney:

There are certain remarkable women in all countries who, whatever sphere they may be in, fill that sphere as completely as a great actor fills the stage. Widow Fontaine was one of these noteworthy persons. The wretched little room seemed to disappear when she softly glided into it; and even the pretty Minna herself receded into partial obscurity in her mother's presence. And yet there was nothing in the least obtrusive in the manner of Madame Fontaine, and nothing remarkable in her stature. Her figure, reaching no more than the middle height, was the well-rounded figure of a woman approaching forty years of age. The influence she exercised was, in part, attributable, as I suppose, to the supple grace of all her movements; in part, to the commanding composure of her expression and the indescribable witchery of her manner. Her dark eyes, never fully opened in my remembrance, looked at me under heavy overhanging upper eyelids. Her enemies saw something sensual in their strange expression. To my mind it was rather something furtively cruel—except when she looked at her daughter. Sensuality shows itself most plainly in the excessive development of the lower part of the face. Madame Fontaine's lips were thin, and her chin was too small. Her profuse black hair was just beginning to be streaked with grey. Her complexion wanted colour. In spite of these drawbacks, she was still a striking, I might almost say a startling creature, when you first looked at her. And, though

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<sup>44</sup> Lisa Kathleen Hamilton, 'Myths of Recognizability: The Signifying Body in the Nineteenth-Century Novel' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1998), pp. 3-4.



she only wore the plainest widow's weeds, I don't scruple to assert that she was the most perfectly dressed woman I ever saw.<sup>45</sup>

The description of her lower features, however, suggests characteristics antithetical with those we shall come to associate with Collins's villainess. Her thin lips indicate a self-restraint and lack of feeling, and her excessively small chin implies an almost complete lack of will and determination. This dichotomous physiognomy is perhaps what Collins intended, the personality of his 'heroine' being equally ambiguous, or at least seeming so from young David's reactions. Having initially praised Mme Fontaine's exquisite charm and manner, he will later confess to being ill at ease in her company. Certainly, her heavy eyelids, her thin lips, her small chin, her greying hair and sensual jowl hardly make her seem attractive, and yet attractive she is, with supple grace, commanding composure and indescribable witchery, appearing perfectly dressed in widow's weeds. Collins has always excelled in balancing praise and blame by means of antithesis, but in this passage he seems to be contrasting two forms of evil as well as his narrator's more immediately perceived feelings of attraction and repugnance.

Related, we are told, fifty years after the events it describes, *Jezebel's Daughter* opens with the deaths, on the same day, of Mr Wagner, a German businessman and philanthropist, and Dr Fontaine, an experimental chemist who had discovered the secrets of the Borgias' poisons and their antidotes. Mr Wagner's legacy to his wife is his position in his company; Dr Fontaine's legacy to his wife is to cast her upon the mercy of her disapproving relatives. His scientific research and artefacts are to be donated to the University of Würzburg.

Mrs Wagner continues her husband's work as he would have wished, employing women on the same footing as men in the company's English and German offices, and effecting the release into her custody of Jack Straw, an inmate of Bethlehem Hospital. Mme Fontaine continues her husband's work not at all as he would have wished, using his

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<sup>45</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Jezebel's Daughter*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1995), Part 1, Chapter X.

poisons, which she has secretly appropriated, in an effort to murder Mrs Wagner, who has discovered Mme Fontaine's theft of some of the company's money. She is, however, foiled in her attempt by the simple-minded Jack Straw, who, without fully understanding his own actions, gives Mrs Wagner the last drops of the antidote, and Mme Fontaine the remainder of the same deadly poison she had administered to her enemy.

Running parallel to these events is the love story between Mme Fontaine's daughter, Minna, and Fritz Keller, the son of Mrs Wagner's business partner. Mr Keller is anxious that his son should marry a girl of good family, and it is to prevent his learning that Minna's mother is a thief that Mme Fontaine resorts to murder.

The novel, published in 1880, is a reworking of *The Red Vial*, a play written over two decades earlier.<sup>46</sup> After a disastrous run of only five weeks at the Olympic Theatre in October and November 1858, the play was taken off, and Collins, deeply wounded by its hostile reception, refused to allow *The Red Vial* to be published, or ever performed again. *Jezebel's Daughter* contains some slight modifications to the original story, one of which is of particular importance: Mrs Wagner has replaced Isaac Rodenberg as the person who removes Jack Straw from Bedlam, and who is in danger of exposing Mme Fontaine's embezzlement to the detriment of her daughter's marriage. This amendment has the effect of significantly altering the sexual dynamics of the story. Jack Straw's devotion to his saviour is no longer mere gratitude to a man who has rescued him from the violent regime of the asylum; it is now the protective adoration of a man, albeit a man feminized by his limited intelligence, for a 'pretty lady' (*JD*, Pt. 1. Ch. V) who—he believes—relies upon him to help her survive in the male-dominated world of business and commerce. Conversely, any suggestion that Widow Bergmann, the prototypical Mme Fontaine, should be granted clemency because of her sex is removed by making the person who discovers, and threatens to reveal, her theft another woman. In this way, an element of feminine

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<sup>46</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Red Vial*, (1858) unpublished manuscript in the Lord Chamberlain's Files, British Library, Add. MS 52976 D.

rivalry between the 'good' widow and the 'bad' widow is established, thus enabling Collins to employ his favourite split or double heroine paradigm.

In Mrs Wagner, Collins creates a true feminist heroine, who is likened to 'Boadicea, Queen Elizabeth, and Joan of Arc, as women who had matched men on their own ground' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. VIII). Whilst her power has been bestowed upon her, rather than achieved through her own endeavours, she proves herself a worthy successor to her late husband. No domestic angel, she is at once able to take over the running of a company, whilst at the same time overruling her male advisers who feel that her 'adoption' of Jack is rash and foolhardy: "It would be inexcusable, even in a man, to run such a risk," objects her lawyer. "I don't believe there is another woman in England who would think of such a thing" (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. VII). Mme Fontaine, on the other hand, has received no such commission following the death of her husband, and has had to steal his poisons, just as she has to steal what little power she has over others. Although she is manipulative, and is prepared to kill to achieve her aims, her motives, unlike those of Helena Gracedieu, are neither evil nor selfish. Reierstad has, mistakenly, made much of what he considers to be Mme Fontaine's 'magalomaniacal [*sic*] mind'.<sup>47</sup> His view that 'Collins has drawn Mme Fontaine as first and foremost a woman to whom power is all' is severely exaggerated. She is not the power-crazed creature he wishes us to believe; she is simply a woman who is all too aware of the impotence of her sex in a male-dominated world.

As she explains in a letter to Julie, an erstwhile friend of hers, having alienated her father by marrying a lowly medical man, she determines that her husband should become 'a famous physician [who] is ennobled by the State,' and that she will 'leave no stone unturned [...] to push my husband forward. And when he is made a Baron, we shall see what my father will say to us then' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XV). Her desire to see her husband elevated to the nobility is not a wish for vicarious self-aggrandizement, nor for the power

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<sup>47</sup> Reierstad, p. 396.

concomitant with that nobility; rather, it is a means of cocking a snook at her father, by whose disparagement she has been wounded.

She confides her longing for power a further three times to Julie. The first of these revelations is prompted by the negative influence exerted over her husband by a strange Hungarian scientist: 'Power—oh, if only I had the power to make the fury that consumes me felt! The curse of our sex is its powerlessness' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XV). Her lament is not that she herself lacks power, but that her entire sex has no safe or respectable means of escaping from male oppression. She has already revealed her contempt for a society which demands that, for the sake of her daughter's reputation, she 'must live a life of deceit, and feign respect and regard for a man whom I despise with my whole heart' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XV); the hazards of any other attitude have already been considered in my discussion of *The Evil Genius*. Her second revelation, again prompted by her husband's shortcomings, is less an indication of megalomania, than evidence of an awareness of the social injustices which accompany poverty. Since the majority of Dr Fontaine's limited income is spent on his chemical experiments, there is little left to clothe his wife and daughter in expensive gowns. Unable to bear the shame of being seen by her peers in anything other than 'the best material that is made' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XV), Mme Fontaine has incurred debts which she is unable to repay. Although she makes light of the situation in her letter to Julie—'What does it matter? I have pacified them, for the time, with some small instalments of money, and a large expenditure of smiles' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XV)—her sensitivity to her impoverished condition is revealed:

'Ah, Julie, if I only had such an income as yours, I would make my power felt in this place. The insolent women should fawn on me and fear me. I would have my own house and establishment in the country, to purify me after the atmosphere of the Professor's drugs. I would—well! well! never mind what else I would have.' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XV)

It is significant that she says 'what else I would *have*,' rather than 'what else I would *do*:' she has no wish to avenge herself on those who have mocked her; she merely wishes them to regard her with envy, just as she regards them with envy now.

The third time she wishes for power in her letters to Julie is prompted by reading a newspaper account of a female poisoner's execution. Her empathy with the murderess is not, however, based on a shared homicidal urge; rather it is grounded in respect for a woman who has been able to step outside the confines of her sex. Unlike the thwarted criminal lionized by Helena Gracedieu, Mme Fontaine's heroine has been wholly successful in her campaigns:

Wherever she went, the path of this terrific woman is strewn with the dead whom she has poisoned. She appears to have lived to destroy her fellow-creatures, and to have met her doom with the most undaunted courage. What a career! and what an end!

The foolish people in Würzburg are at a loss to find motives for some of the murders she committed [...] I can understand the murderess becoming morally intoxicated with the sense of her own tremendous power. A mere human creature—*only a woman, Julie!*—armed with the means of secretly dealing death with her, wherever she goes. (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XV; my italics)

Frustrated by a marriage which has disappointed all her expectations, and by the joint limitations of poverty and sex, Mme Fontaine's admiration of this woman is little more than an escapist fantasy. Whilst this story might be responsible for her appropriation after his death of her husband's box of poisons, and of her subsequent employment of them, its inclusion in Mme Fontaine's letter to Julie, before the death, from natural causes, of Dr Fontaine, can hardly be evidence of premeditation. Even the opinion of the unworldly David Glenney seems a little harsh: Mme Fontaine's letters, he feels, paint 'a picture of a perverted mind, struggling between good and evil, and slowly losing ground under the stealthy influence of temptation' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XV).

The most damning proof of her thirst for power occurs at the beginning of the second part of the novel:

'Power!' she thought, with a superb smile of triumph. 'The power that I have dreamed of all my life is mine at last! Alone among mortal creatures, I have Life and Death for my servants [...] What a position! I stand here, a dweller in a populous city—and every creature in it, from highest to lowest, is a creature in my power!' (*JD*, Pt. 2, Ch. II)

Certainly Reierstad could, from this speech, be forgiven for thinking that Mme Fontaine suffers from the most acute megalomaniac delusions. These smugly murderous thoughts are, however, attributed to Mme Fontaine not by an omniscient narrator, but by David Glenney, who, in his youth was a singularly dim-witted individual, and is at the time of narrating evidently in his dotage. Mr Glenney, moreover, has already averred his dislike of Mme Fontaine. Clearly, this could be an oversight on Collins's part: he could intend his reader to take Glenney's words as an accurate representation of Mme Fontaine's most secret thoughts. Given the precision with which Collins constructs his novels, and the accuracy of his plotting, it would, however, seem improbable, that he should overlook such a detail as this.<sup>48</sup>

What Mme Fontaine requires more than power is money, and the reason she requires money is so that she may pay off her debts and ensure her daughter's future happiness: quite respectable characters in Trollope and Mrs Henry Wood are to be found in the same position. Her love for Minna serves a double function within the novel: it is at once the driving force behind her criminal activities, and the single quality which lifts her above them. When Mr Keller has made it clear that he will never allow his son to marry Minna, Collins, intervening *in propria persona*, describes Mme Fontaine's anguish on her daughter's behalf:

She drew Minna to her bosom, and embraced in silent rapture the one creature whom she loved [...] The all-ennobling tears of love and grief filled her eyes [...] Hers was not a wholly corrupted heart. It was always in Minna's power to lift her above her own wickedness. (*JD*, Pt. 1. Ch. XIII)

Indeed, Collins is, from his Preface onwards, anxious that the reader should not be entirely out of sympathy with Mme Fontaine. He has, he tells us,

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<sup>48</sup> See the comments made by Anthony Trollope, in his *Autobiography*, quoted in the preceding chapter. Alison A. Case in *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999) identifies a convention of 'feminine narration' in the novel, in which the female narrator is excluded from 'shaping her experience into a coherent, meaningful, and authoritative story,' and replaced by a male narrator who 'steps in to shape the narrative either within the text or in a pseudoeditorial frame' (p. ix). This lack of female narrative authority she sees as representing larger concerns about female power and agency in society as a whole.

[...] endeavoured to work out the interesting moral problem, which takes for its groundwork the strongest of all instincts in a woman, the instinct of maternal love, and traces to its solution the restraining and purifying influence of this one virtue over an otherwise cruel, false, and degraded nature. (*JD*, Preface)

Curiously, rather than fulfilling this intention, Collins illustrates instead the cruel, false and degrading influence of a mother's love over an otherwise restrained and pure nature. The *Academy's* reviewer somewhat understated his case when he objected that 'maternal love which prompts to poisoning for the sake of the beloved object can scarcely be said to "purify."' <sup>49</sup> In *Jezebel's Daughter* it corrupts.

Married to a husband who 'will hesitate at no sacrifice of [...] ordinary comforts to increase his professional knowledge' (*JD*, Pt. 1. Ch. XV), Mme Fontaine manages to be a good, if unhappy, wife until the birth of her daughter. As she tells Julie:

I have but one consolation—a lovely baby [...]: I had almost said an angel. Were you as fond of your first child, I wonder, as I am of mine? And did you utterly forget your husband, when the little darling was first put into your arms? (*JD*, Pt. 1. Ch. XV)

Mme Fontaine's moral decline can be traced from this point. Forgetting one's husband was, for economically dependent nineteenth-century women, a definite means of ensuring marital decay. 'I would suggest to every woman never to allow her children to usurp the time and loving attention due to the husband. If she does, home will be no home to him; he will become irritable and seek comfort elsewhere,' warned Mrs Warren in her semi-fictionalized account, *How I Managed My Children from Infancy to Marriage*.<sup>50</sup> Dr Fontaine, then, does indeed become irritable, and seeks comfort in his work and his friendship with the Hungarian professor. He is not the only one to suffer from these feelings. Mme Fontaine, growing increasingly irritable with the lacklustre life imposed upon her by her husband, seeks comfort in spoiling her child:

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<sup>49</sup> Townshend Mayer, 'New Novels', *Academy*, 17 (1880), 318.

<sup>50</sup> Mrs Warren, *How I Managed My Children from Infancy to Marriage* (London: Houlston and Wright, 1865), p. 42; quoted in Shires, p. 33.

I cannot see my child in a stuff frock, on promenade days in the Palace Gardens, when other people's children are wearing silk [...] She is the loveliest and sweetest child in the world—my pride at all times, and my salvation in my desperate moods. [...] I take Minna out and buy her a little present, and see her eyes sparkle and her colour rise, and feel her innocent kisses, and become, for a while, quite a good woman again. (*JD*, Pt. 1. Ch. XV)

Indeed, all her wicked actions are prompted by her overwhelming love for her daughter. In order to ingratiate herself with Mr Keller, and thus be in a better position to plead her daughter's case, she administers poison to him so that, when the doctors have given up hope, she may step in and cure him. Successful in this endeavour, and established as his housekeeper, she is still afraid to reveal the extent of her debts—incurred in the pampering of 'nice little Miss Minna' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XVI)—and must somehow acquire sufficient funds to repay her creditors as Mr Keller has made it clear that he will not allow a debtor's daughter to become his son's wife:

She remembered the inhuman scorn with which he had spoken of persons who failed to meet their pecuniary engagements honestly. Even if he forgave her for deceiving him—which was in the last degree improbable—he was the sort of man who would suspect her of other deceptions [...] The risk to herself of encountering these dangers was trifling. But the risk to Minna involved nothing less than the breaking off of the marriage. She decided on keeping up appearances, at any sacrifice, until the marriage released her from the necessities of disguise. (*JD*, Pt. 2, Ch. VIII)

Her attempts to gain money by pawning a necklace are thwarted by her inability to provide references, and her decision to prostitute herself by marrying an elderly gentleman, whose hand she has previously refused, comes to nothing when he inconveniently dies of apoplexy. The only recourse available to her, and one she realizes will eventually be discovered, is to steal five thousand florins from the Wagner-Keller Reserve Fund, in the hope that her daughter's marriage will have taken place before she is exposed as a criminal. Events conspire against her: her daughter's wedding is postponed, and the annual examination of the accounts is announced. The deception is detected, and Mme Fontaine is given a week in which to repay the money. Knowing that this will be impossible, she throws herself upon Mrs Wagner's mercy, but her pleas are met with hostility and contempt. Mme Fontaine—whose pride caused her to dress herself and her daughter in the finest clothes, and to live beyond their limited means—has already



partially abased herself in order to protect Minna's future happiness. She makes one last, desperate attempt to prevent Mrs Wagner from revealing the truth to Mr Keller:

'Your hard words have roused my pride,' she said; 'I have forgotten that I am a disgraced woman; I have not spoken humbly enough. See! I am humbled now—I implore your mercy on my knees. This is not only *my* last chance; it is Minna's last chance. Don't blight my poor girl's life, for my fault!'(JD, Pt. 2, Ch. XI)<sup>51</sup>

When, in *The Red Vial*, Isaac Rodenberg refused to heed Widow Bergmann's pleas, he did so with compassion; although his conscience would not allow him to lie to his business partner about where the money had gone, he promised to plead Minna's case, and to emphasize her innocence. Mr Rodenberg, however, was speaking in 1858, before Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* provoked widespread interest in heredity. Clearly, when making this rash promise, he was unaware of the tendency of daughters to inherit their mothers' vices. Mrs Wagner shows no such charity: she simply waits for Mme Fontaine to leave the room. Collins's juxtaposition of the two women highlights the precariousness of their situation. Mrs Wagner, a woman in a man's world, cannot afford to show the softer, gentler side of her nature, without risking her authority. As Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald, and Myra Stark suggest in their analysis of the works of Collins, Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope:

By placing 'bad' or even criminal characters [...] in positions of power, [these authors] imply—however circumspectly—the radical idea that the 'good' woman has little real independence or power. And by presenting the 'bad' woman as a victim of a cruelly oppressive sexual system, they undermine the orthodox position still further.<sup>52</sup>

Mrs Wagner may appear to possess real independence and power, but she has had to sacrifice her femininity to maintain it. No longer a truly 'good' character, she shows significantly less concern for the future well-being of Minna than she did for that of Jack

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<sup>51</sup> Again, I would disagree with Reierstad, who regards this speech as proof that 'maternal love has taken second place to the instinct of self-preservation' (p. 397).

<sup>52</sup> Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald, and Myra Stark, *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins, and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 19.

Straw. Mme Fontaine, whose legitimate power is nugatory, is, moreover, not merely a victim of a system which condemned her to feign respect and affection for a husband she loathed, but also a victim of the intolerance of one of her own sex, from whom she might have expected some form of sympathy.

The poisoning of Mr Rodenberg seemed a harsh punishment for a man who had only tried to do his duty. The poisoning of Mrs Wagner, on the other hand, seems retributively fitting, and one can only wonder at Mme Fontaine's misgivings.

Far from displaying the selfishness which colours the actions of many of Collins's wicked—and, indeed, not so wicked—creatures, Mme Fontaine is capable of sacrificing the thing she holds most dear, her daughter Minna: “the idea of parting with her to any man fills me with grief and dismay. I only yielded to the marriage engagement, when the conviction was forced upon me that my poor child's happiness depended on her union with your son” (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. XIII), she writes to Mr Keller. Reierstad finds himself ‘tempted to wonder if her love for Minna is less other-directed than self-directed—yet another manifestation of [her] desire for power.’<sup>53</sup> clearly, it is not. Having abandoned her self-interest totally to the welfare of her child, she never wavers from the path she has chosen. Only when the die has been cast, and Mrs Wagner's death is, she believes, imminent, does she allow herself a moment of self-doubt: “Do you love me with all your heart and soul?” she asked [Minna] suddenly. “Are you worthy of any sacrifice that a mother can make for her child?” (*JD*, Pt. 2, Ch. XIII). The questions are rhetorical, and, afraid of hearing a negative response, she allows Minna no time to reply.

Critics who choose to impute only selfish or evil propensities to Mme Fontaine appear to be ignoring Collins's own frequent testimonials to his character's virtues, and siding with her fictional detractors. Frau Meyer, whose code of ethics does not proscribe the sending of vituperous anonymous letters, is scathingly dismissive of Mme Fontaine's feelings for

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53 Reierstad, p. 395.

Minna: 'I don't deny that she is a fond mother; but is the maternal instinct enough of itself to answer for a woman? Why, [...] a cat is a fond mother; but a cat scratches and swears for all that' (*JD*, Pt. 1, Ch. VII),<sup>54</sup> a view which Taylor considers to be 'never completely overturned.'<sup>55</sup> Contemporary critics, writing when the sanctity of motherhood was perhaps eulogized somewhat more than it is today, disapproved of this appropriation and distortion of one of their purest ideals.<sup>56</sup> The *Spectator's* reviewer wondered:

Why should Mr Collins try to make us believe that Jezebel, the modern Lucrezia Borgia, who will poison you as soon as look at you, is [...] redeemed [...] by the supremacy of her maternal affection? This redemption is so palpably lugged in by the head and ears, and is in itself so grotesquely preposterous, that we should have supposed even Mr Collins might have hesitated to suggest it. But he has done so in accordance with a fashion which was perhaps introduced by Dickens, and which has been violently developed since his time, the fashion of discovering exquisite traits of generosity, tenderness, and nobility in natures the most lost and degraded. It is a cheap and tawdry form of sentimentality.<sup>57</sup>

Mrs Wagner, however, is necessarily immune to tawdry forms of sentimentality, having no child of her own for whom to care and scheme. Her adoption of Jack could be seen as a form of maternal surrogacy; certainly, her blind faith in him echoes Mme Fontaine's implicit trust in her child. Jack, an earlier victim of one of Dr Fontaine's poisons, is an

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54 It is the phrase 'a cat is a fond mother' which later betrays Frau Meyer to David as the sender of the anonymous letter to Fritz. He could equally have accused the Doctor in *The Legacy of Cain* of being his friend's unknown correspondent, as this gentleman also opines, in reference to Eunice's natural mother, that 'a cat is fond of her kittens' (*LC*, Ch. VII).

55 Taylor, p. 267.

56 Frances Power Cobbe, despite her feminist leanings, felt that:

So *immense* are the claims on a Mother, physical claims on her bodily and brain vigour, and moral claims on her heart and thoughts, that she cannot, I believe, meet them all, and find any large margin beyond for other cares and work. She serves the community in the best and highest way it is possible to do, by giving birth to healthy children [...] This is her *Function*, Public and Private, at once—The *Profession* which she has adopted. No higher can be found; and in my judgment it is a misfortune [...] when a woman [...] is lured by any generous ambition to add [...] any other systematic work; either as breadwinner to the family, or as philanthropist or politician. (*The Duties of Women: A Course of Lectures* (London, 1881), pp. 161-62; quoted in Jalland, p. 7)

57 Unsigned review, *Spectator*, 53 (1880), 627-28, p. 628; quoted in Page, p. 209. It is interesting that this reviewer is unwilling even to attribute negative aspects of Collins's work to Collins himself, preferring instead to regard them as overblown imitations of Dickens's artistic foibles.

important figure in the novel: his presence is a constant threat to Mme Fontaine, and yet she cannot bring herself to destroy him, even though she has the appetizing-looking poison to hand;

She was beside herself, without knowing why. Poor Jack's innocent attempts to persuade her to his destruction had, in their pitiable simplicity, laid a hold on that complex and terrible nature which shook it to its centre. The woman stood face to face with her own contemplated crime, and trembled at the diabolical treachery of it. (*JD*, Pt. 2, Ch. V)

Whether her reluctance to murder Jack stems entirely from the pity he arouses in her, or from the fact that his death would in no way further her daughter's cause, is left to the reader to decide. Her compassion, however, is her undoing. In his eagerness to save his beloved Mrs Wagner, he inadvertently poisons Mme Fontaine, and thus—if being a hero means saving the innocent and persecuting the guilty—firmly establishes his right to that role within the novel. Diminutive in both stature and intelligence, he would prove, for many writers, to be a most unsatisfactory champion; for Collins, however—who, as I shall show in my next chapter, had an antipathy towards symbols of testosterone-laden masculinity—he is the ideal.



In all Collins's novels we are given a somewhat oblique vision both of the icons of his society and of their representation in the novel. In *'I Say No'*, *Blind Love*, *Jezebel's Daughter*, and *The Legacy of Cain*, we are forced to reconsider what we understand by, and expect from, the heroines and villainesses of fiction. Characters such as Iris Henley, Mrs Wagner, and even Emily Brown's Aunt Letitia are shown to be narrow-minded and arrogantly convinced of their own infallibility to such an extent that their actions lead, at best, to the dismissal and loss of character of one less fortunate than themselves, and, at worst, to the murder of an innocent man. Moreover, their holier-than-thou attitudes are on occasion clearly tinged with such jealousy and resentment that it becomes clear that, whatever failings are attributed to Collins's wicked creatures, they will be hard put to rival their virtuous sisters in hypocrisy. Eunice manages to avoid both hypocrisy and

criminal activity, although her subconscious mind certainly entertains thoughts of the latter. Of the 'bad' characters, Mrs Vimpany, however implausibly, reforms and leads a life of penitential self-sacrifice, whilst Miss Jethro and Mme Fontaine are shown to be motivated less by evil instincts than by desperation. It is significant that so inept are they at the crimes they attempt to perpetrate that Miss Jethro's deception is rapidly revealed by an infirm old woman, and Mme Fontaine's attempt to poison her enemy results in her own death. Only Helena, Mrs Tenbruggen, and Francine show any truly malevolent inclinations, and Collins even provides us with some explanation or justification for their misdeeds.

Two factors stand out with regard to Collins's transgressive heroines. Firstly, with the possible exception of Helena, they are not fundamentally wicked, but they are all—thanks to orphanage, widowhood, ineffectual husbands and fathers, as well as their own dubious or obscure ethnic or familial origins—isolated from the society which surrounds them, and the world in which they live leaves them with few weapons with which to defend themselves other than their own femininity, which, to survive, they use in the only way they know how. The second factor relating to these wicked creatures is dependent upon the reader's perception of them. It would never have suited Collins, with his love of labyrinthine plots and improbable coincidences, simply to subvert established stereotypical representations of virtuous and wicked women, and with them, the binary oppositions of good/bad, selfless/selfish, benign/malignant. Proving that those who appear—because of their racial otherness, ignoble employment, putative hereditary taint, or tendency towards extravagance and profligacy—to be base or corrupt are really of unblemished but much maligned character is, for him, little more than a game, whose object is to confirm that he can now, as ever, control what his reader perceives and believes. His true purpose is to show that his wicked creatures may indeed be bad, but rarely wholly so, and never for the reason his reader expects.



# Chapter Four

## OTHER MEN



Thus far, this study has concentrated on Collins's frequently nonconformist novelistic treatment of women and their position within a male-dominated society. In this chapter, however, I shall analyse the ways in which Collins also challenges the accepted view of the Victorian idyll of courtship and marriage, and, by so doing, undermines the dominant code of masculinity, in terms both of the behaviour and of the inherent characteristics of his male protagonists.

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw a crisis in masculinity. Just as women were expected to comply with a sexually remote and submissive feminine ideal, so men were expected to conform to a dynamic and dominant masculine ideal. On the one hand, they were receiving such subversively proto-feminist doctrines as 'the inequality of rights between men and women has no other source than the law of the [physically] strongest,'<sup>1</sup> whilst on the other, they were having to contend with increased emphasis on the necessity for men to fulfil more 'manly' roles and behavioural patterns.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Mill, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> David D. Gilmore regards masculinity primarily as a burden, rather than a mode of empowerment. He further argues that the rigid social norms involved in the concept of masculinity function as a control over men, rather than as a means of dominating women.

expansion of the British Empire called for men with great reserves of commercial and military acumen, and, as Janet Oppenheim observes, ‘veneration of success, always a dominant motif in Victorian culture, now struck a harsher note, verging on utter intolerance of masculine failure.’<sup>3</sup>

Some thinkers tried to rationalize the roles of men and women in society, and to persuade their audiences that these should be mutually supportive and overlapping in terms of responsibility. Ruskin, for example, was of the opinion that both sexes wielded—or were capable of wielding—equal power, albeit of a very different nature. In many ways, his philosophy and Collins’s follow the same path, inasmuch as both believe that the well-being (or otherwise) of society is dependent in equal measure on men and women. Moreover, both writers share the somewhat outlandish view that quite often men require more guidance than women in matters of great import. According to Ruskin:

There is not a war in the world, no, nor an injustice, but you women are answerable for it; not in that you have provoked, but in that you have not hindered. Men, by their nature, are prone to fight; they will fight for any cause, or for none. It is for you to choose their cause for them, and to forbid them when there is no cause.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Collins and Ruskin’s views do diverge in one significant detail. Ruskin is a firm believer in gender-determinate aptitudes and characteristics:

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman’s power is for rule, not for

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(*Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)).

<sup>3</sup> Janet Oppenheim, *‘Shattered Nerves’: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> John Ruskin, ‘Sesame and Lilies’, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, (London: George Allen, 1902-1912), XVIII (1905), p. 140.

battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision.<sup>5</sup>

Collins, on the other hand, only partially accepts these distinctions. The frequent and plaintive cries of Marian Halcombe and Valeria Macallan, two of his strongest and most determined female characters, that ‘I am only a woman,’ invariable sound parodic and insincere. In Collins’s world view, those same ‘masculine/feminine’ qualities are sublated. As Donna Haraway, more than a century later, remarks, ‘gender is always a relationship, not a preformed category of beings or a possession that one can have.’<sup>6</sup>

Ruskin’s words were, sadly, misinterpreted by some, and much of his true message became twisted to fit into conveniently patriarchal moulds. According to Ronald Pearsall, for example, ‘Men read and listened to Ruskin because this was what they wanted to have confirmed, and women read and listened because he was emphasizing the role in life that had been hammered into them since they were toddlers.’<sup>7</sup> Collins’s message is, perhaps, clearer, and his subversive view of gender roles can be open to no such misinterpretation.

In the novels examined here—*Poor Miss Finch* (1872), *The Law and The Lady* (1875), and *The Black Robe* (1881)—Collins examines the consequences of failing to live up to the perceived successful, masculine ideal. His male protagonists abdicate their prescribed ‘manly’ roles, leaving the doing, the creating, and, in *The Law and the Lady* in particular, the defending, almost exclusively in the hands of their female counterparts. The latter, meanwhile, whilst certainly achieving their aims of ruling, ordering, arranging, and deciding, are much less likely than their male colleagues to shrink from battle, invention and creation. At a time, then, when men and women believed they were being exhorted to maintain ‘separate spheres’ with regard to duty and behaviour,

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<sup>5</sup> Ruskin, ‘Sesame and Lilies’, pp. 121-22.

<sup>6</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse^: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Pearsall, p. 75.



Collins was at pains to blur these distinctions. Instead of promoting the exemplary mentally dynamic, physically active man as husband, Collins was busily marrying his heroines to men with psychological handicaps, men with corporal disabilities, men with obscure social roles or dubious racial origins, all of whom fell far short of any 'manly' ideal.

From the earliest days of his career, Collins had been aware that the division of masculinity and femininity into nothing more than a Boolean condition was simply an idealized fiction, and this he attempted to show in his novels. The protagonist of *Hide and Seek*, Zack, for example, is psychologically scarred by his up-bringing, and, despite having achieved the age of legal maturity remains infantilized as far as a sexual interest in members of the opposite sex is concerned. The eponymous *Basil*, likewise, has to wait to achieve manhood as his obnoxious father-in-law requires that his marriage remain not only secret, but also unconsummated for a year. This symbolic hiatus in his sexual development must necessarily have a feminizing effect on his character. It is only after his unfaithful wife and her lover die, and a reconciliation with his father has taken place, that Basil is in a position to resume his rightful masculine identity. The villain, Mannion also suffers from the emasculating effect of disfigurement, following Basil's attack on him. The beautiful, deaf Lodger in a later novella, *The Guilty River*, and the blind hero, Leonard Frankland, in *The Dead Secret* provide further examples of the notion of the feminization of the male through disability, whilst *The Woman in White's* effete, selfish, hypochondriac Frederick Fairlie provides a different image of the unmanly male/dependent child figure.

In *The Moonstone* all the major male characters—with the possible exception of the House-Steward, Gabriel Betteredge—would appear to have more than their fair share of feminine characteristics. The blurring of gender categories is evident in the way in which Franklin Blake and Godfrey Ablewhite are portrayed. Ablewhite, with his 'head of lovely long flaxen hair, falling negligently over the poll of his neck' is 'a barrister by profession; a ladies' man by temperament; and a good Samaritan by choice. Female benevolence and female destitution could do nothing without him' (*TM*, *The Story*, First

Period, Ch. 8). His interest in things feminine thus renders him harmless and defuses any dangerous masculinity which might otherwise burst forth at any moment. Franklin Blake's ambivalent gender status, on the other hand, stems from his unconventional, European education, his foreign tastes, and his lack of a clearly defined social role: 'He wrote a little; he painted a little; he sang and played and composed a little' (*TM*, The Story, First Period, Ch. 3). In addition to these rather feminine pastimes, he confesses that upon seeing Betteredge after spending some time 'wandering in the East', 'My own eyes were full of tears. I was obliged to wait for a moment before I could trust myself to speak to him' (*TM*, The Story, Second Period, Third Narrative, Ch. 1). However, by far the most interesting and enigmatic character in this novel is that of the doctor's assistant, Ezra Jennings. Jennings becomes feminized (in as much as he is condemned to play a secondary or subordinate role in society) partly because of his blurred social role—he is a man with a Past—and also because of his racial origins: 'He had suffered as few men suffer; and there was a mixture of some foreign race in his English blood' (*TM*, The Story, Second Period, Third Narrative, Ch. 9). The putative significance of ethnic otherness is discussed below in relation to *Poor Miss Finch*, although physical difference as a source of gender indeterminacy occurs throughout Collins's novels.

In the later novels, however, and in particular in the ones discussed below, the use to which Collins puts his male characters' femininity undergoes a significant change. Whereas previously, the unmanliness of his men had been a byproduct of his narrative, it is now a motive force within the story. Collins's earlier heroines embarked, with remarkably unfeminine gusto, upon sensational adventures in spite of the weakness of their male companions; Lucilla Finch, Valeria Macallan, and Stella Romaine, however, are much more reluctantly dynamic than their predecessors, and embark upon their adventures because their male companions' manly shortcomings leave them with no viable alternative.

As I have already illustrated, one of Collins's favourite stylistic devices is the splitting of his female protagonist into two or more characters, a technique which brings into question the true identity of the novel's heroine. Collins does not reserve this dyadic

paradigm for his female characters alone. From the many and various incarnations of the eponymous protagonist in *Armadale*, written in the 1860s, to Lord Harry Norland and Hugh Mountjoy in *Blind Love*, unfinished at the time of his death some twenty-five years later, Collins's novels abound with split male protagonists, all of whom, in one way or another, highlight nineteenth century concern with men, and masculinity.

Collins's men, and by extension his husbands, do not conform to the dominant ideology of what constituted a real man, and still less, a real hero or real villain. Rather than adhere to the binary oppositions of good/evil, wise/foolish, strong/weak, selfless/selfish, Collins presents his reader with composite figures who are, perhaps, truer to human nature than literature usually allows. His heroes lack heroism, his villains villainy. His husbands may be ill-suited to their role, either because their fundamental 'niceness' is marred by a weakness of spirit, or because their interests put them at odds with the responsibilities of married life, but with the possible exceptions of Sir Percival Glyde in *The Woman in White*, and Geoffrey Delamayn in *Man and Wife*, they are rarely wholly evil. Their rivals, meanwhile, are not philanderers in the mould of Francis Levison in *East Lynne*: their love is usually honourable, even if their methods do incline to the jesuitical. Faced, then, with a loving but inept husband, and a loving but injudicious rival, we find ourselves questioning the identity of the hero. As Collins's men are only ever representative of the prevailing masculine ideal if they are to be mocked and pilloried, there is no absolute standard, and the only conclusion we can reach is that the definition of certain characters as heroes and of others as villains is, in Collins's mind, inappropriate. Instead, these unmanly men, who are often depicted as feminized or childlike figures, guilty of cowardice, self-doubt and duplicity, fall into two categories: quasi-heroes and ersatz villains.

*Poor Miss Finch*, *The Law and the Lady*, and *The Black Robe* are singular for three reasons. Firstly, they each contain one representative of these two categories. The villains—respectively Nugent Dubourg, Miserrimus Dexter, and Lewis Romaine—are misguided (by their own instincts), rather than evil, and the heroes—respectively Oscar

Dubourg, Eustace Macallan, and Bernard Winterfield—are well-guided (by the female characters), rather than brave.

Secondly, each pair of protagonists in these three novels comprises one able-bodied character, and one who is in some way disabled. Collins, himself not the healthiest or fittest of men, had already made evident his dislike of overly athletic men in *Man and Wife*, telling his readers the cautionary tale of physical activities taken too far. Unlike the disciples of Thomas Arnold, to whom the creation of the hardy and athletic young man is so often wrongly ascribed, Collins viewed sporting excesses in a distinctly negative light. He is, however, not so prejudiced against the robust as to attempt to promote illness as an heroic male virtue, nor does he succumb to the common nineteenth-century tendency of using disfigurement and suffering solely as a means of punishing past transgressions. Instead, he distributes afflictions among his characters with almost the same arbitrariness as Nature.

Of the able-bodied characters examined here—Nugent Dubourg, Macallan (despite his slight limp), and Winterfield—only Nugent can be classed as the villain of his novel, whilst of the disabled characters—Oscar Dubourg, Dexter, and Romaine—only Oscar can be demonstrated, by the outcome of events, to be the hero. Just as George Eliot, writing in the wake of Darwinian evolutionary theory, stressed in *The Mill on the Floss* that ‘an anatomist—even a mere physiognomist—would have seen that the deformity of Philip’s spine was not a congenital hump, but the result of an accident in infancy,’<sup>8</sup> Collins is, twelve years later, equally careful to make clear that Oscar, who has the double affliction of epilepsy and skin-discoloration, is the only disabled character whose gene pool is unquestionably without contamination. His epilepsy is post-traumatic, rather than congenital, and his skin condition is caused by the medicine he must take. Romaine’s hysteria, meanwhile, despite being provoked by external circumstances, could well be argued to have its roots in some hereditary weakness,

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<sup>8</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on The Floss* (London: Blackwood, 1860; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 162.

although, given that the novel ends shortly after the birth of his son, we must hope that any genetic abnormality is recessive in character. Collins leaves us in no doubt, however, that Dexter was born with all his physical and mental abnormalities, but fortunately for eugenicist nineteenth-century readers, he also implies that the continuation of this character's bloodline is not a possibility.<sup>9</sup>

These novels, whilst ostensibly depicting traditional plots revolving around courtship and marriage, on a subliminal level raise, in the words of Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, 'issues of identity, power, freedom, and human fulfillment that ultimately call into question the whole system of sexual relationships in nineteenth-century England.'<sup>10</sup> Collins's husbands, moreover, whether weak and ineffectual like Oscar Dubourg, or self-serving and disloyal like Eustace Macallan and Lewis Romaine, occupy only half of their creator's oblique view of the male ideal. In each of the novels discussed in this chapter, the eventual husband has a rival for the heroine's affections. In many novels of the Victorian period, that rival would be an embodiment of all that is malignant in society, and it would be with a sense of great relief that we saw his plans for the seduction, mental or physical, of the heroine thwarted. In Collins's novels, however, this is not often the case: his rivals frequently possess as many, and occasionally more, redeeming qualities than their legitimate counterparts. Nevertheless, their attractiveness within the novel cannot be unblemished. Collins's rivals, like his husbands, are never 'complete' men: they, too, are feminized, desexed, or rendered childlike, by their inadequacies.

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<sup>9</sup> It is, of course, typical of Collins, that, at a time when, as I discussed in the preceding chapter, women were thought to be the major transmitter of hereditary defects, he has no qualms in *Poor Miss Finch*, about having two eligible bachelors fall in love with a blind girl, and thus run the risk of permanently tainting their blood line.

<sup>10</sup> Barickman, MacDonald and Stark, p. viii.



*Poor Miss Finch*, the thesis of which, Collins informs us, is to prove 'that the conditions of human happiness are independent of bodily affliction, and that it is even possible for bodily affliction itself to take its place among the ingredients of happiness,'<sup>11</sup> is the story of twin brothers, Oscar and Nugent Dubourg, and their love for the blind Lucilla Finch. On a purely superficial level, which appears to be the one favoured by Collins's critics, both contemporary and modern, the story is inclined to be somewhat far-fetched. 'What is the aim of this story?' inquired an unnamed reviewer in 1872, 'That the blind should marry the dark blue?'<sup>12</sup> More recently, Lonoff has objected to it on the grounds that:

The reader is asked to believe in a blind heroine who first regains and then loses her sight, and in a hero who suffers from epileptic fits as the result of an assault by robbers, who turns blue from the silver nitrate he takes to control the seizures, and who nearly loses the heroine because of the machinations of his identical twin.<sup>13</sup>

The underlying messages of the story, however, merit more attention than this somewhat cursory treatment would imply. Not only does Collins offer his readers a study of the conflicting aspects of masculinity; he also illustrates the injustice of prejudice and makes clear that through understanding, such attitudes can be overcome.

Oscar Dubourg is, by virtue of being the object of the heroine's affections if nothing else, the hero of the novel. He is not, however, endowed with many heroic attributes. From the beginning of the story—long before he turns blue—he is depicted in terms which emphasize his femininity and do little to promote the manly ideal. Madame Pratolungo, who, as narrator is the nearest we, as readers, have to an objective witness,

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<sup>11</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch* (London: R. Bentley and Son, 1872; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1994), Preface.

<sup>12</sup> Unsigned review, *Nation*, 14 (1872), 158-59; quoted in Page, p. 199.

<sup>13</sup> Lonoff, p. 25.

is far from impressed by Oscar's manhood. Unlike her 'glorious' revolutionary husband, Oscar is 'handsome, though in rather an effeminate way' (*PMF*, Ch. IV), and his complexion is 'so creamy and fair' that it 'ought to have been a woman's complexion, or at least a boy's. He looked indeed more like a boy than a man: his smooth face was quite uncovered, either by beard, whisker or moustache' (*PMF*, Ch. VII). Moreover, when called to account by this redoubtable female, he 'confronted [her] in speechless dismay: his colour coming and going like the colour of a young girl' (*PMF*, Ch. VII). Collins no doubt wished to draw his readers' attention to Oscar's fairness of face primarily to emphasize the eventual contrast which would be created by the disfiguring effects of the silver nitrate. Nevertheless, this insistence upon his character's womanly complexion, his boyish skin and his girlish blushes serves equally to highlight Oscar's unfitness for his designated role of hero. His feminization is further developed in his character: he is indecisive, vacillating, passive to the circumstances which affect him, as well as to the sway of his own emotions, preferring instead to be guided by his 'angelic' brother or dominated by the women who surround him.

Only as his skin begins to darken does he begin to show any strength of character, and even then what he displays is 'the immovable obstinacy of a weak man' (*PMF*, Ch XXII). His new, less womanly skin-tone does, however, tend to minimize Madame Pratolungo's inclination to refer to him as 'effeminate', something she has done, previously, with some frequency. This does not, of course, indicate that blueness of skin equates with masculinity. Oscar's unusual disfigurement is a deliberate metaphor for racial difference, a topic that Collins had already explored, sympathetically, in its purest form, in *The Moonstone* and *Armadale*, and one to which he would return in *Heart and Science*. The 'afflicted' characters in these novels differ from Oscar only inasmuch as the darkness of their skins is due to their colonial origins and not to any medical procedure.

Nevertheless, the connexion between femininity and foreign blood, and by extension, skin-colour, was a widely-held belief in the nineteenth century. Be it Oscar's unnatural

complexion or Ezra Jennings 'parti-coloured hair', these 'identifying features' set their bearers aside from the accepted gender role. Only three years before Mill, with heavy sarcasm, had put forward the scandalous notion that, if men were more intelligent than women merely because they had larger bodies, and by inference, larger brains, then 'a tall and large-boned man must on this showing be wonderfully superior in intelligence to a small man, and an elephant or a whale must prodigiously excel mankind,'<sup>14</sup> Carl Vogt calculated that everything in the evolutionary process pointed to the fact that the development of the 'inferior' races tended to parallel that of a child or a woman, rather than that of the evolving white male:

The Negro-child is not, as regards the intellectual capacities, behind the white child, [but] no sooner do they reach the fatal period of puberty, than, with the closure of the sutures and the projection of the jaws, the same process takes place as in the ape. The intellectual faculties remain stationary, and the individual—as well as the race—incapable of further progress. [Thus] the grown-up Negro partakes, as regard his intellectual faculties, of the nature of the child, the female, and the senile white.<sup>15</sup>

Collins, himself, clearly did not share this widely-held view, and in his treatment of his racially different characters in the other novels mentioned, he actively opposed it.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in the eyes of the reader, the image of poor Oscar as a child-like, feminized male,

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<sup>14</sup> Mill, p. 181. The view which Mill so scathingly challenged continued to be propagated, however. In a startlingly unfeministic article entitled 'Science and the Woman Question', Miss M. A. Hardaker attributed male superiority to 'the superior absorbing power of the masculine stomach.' This apparently meant that 'the sum total of food converted into thought by women can never equal the sum total of food converted into thought by men,' and accordingly, 'men will always think more than women' (*Popular Science Monthly*, 20 (1882), 578, 583). Five years later, George J. Romanes was still of the opinion that, as 'the average brain-weight of women is about five ounces less than that of men, on merely anatomical grounds we should be prepared to expect a marked inferiority of intellectual power in the former' ('Mental Differences Between Men and Women', *The Nineteenth Century*, 21 (1887), 654).

<sup>15</sup> Carl Vogt, *Lectures on Man, His Place in Creation, and in the History of the Earth* (1864); quoted in Dijkstra, p. 167.

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting that it is the racially different characters in *Armada*, *The Moonstone*, and *Heart and Science* who are, in fact, the true, if unacknowledged, heroes of their novels: Ozias Midwinter is instrumental in preserving his friend, Allan Armada, from the machinations of Lydia Gwilt; Ezra Jennings is able to decipher the drugged ramblings of Dr Candy, and thus solve the mystery of the theft of the Moonstone; and an unnamed mulatto doctor is the discoverer of the miraculous cure for brain fever, which not only saves the life and sanity of the hapless heroine, Carmina, but also makes the reputation of the 'hero' Ovid Vere, and successfully thwarts the evil schemes of the sinister Dr Benjulia.



of limited intellectual ability, is further strengthened by his newly darkened skin colour.

In addition to the feminization caused by the discoloration of his skin, and the overall picture painted of him by Madame Pratolungo, Oscar also has a guilty secret. He is haunted by the fact that he was, before the start of the story, wrongly accused of murder, and, ironically, lives in dread of being 'stared at by hundreds of cruel eyes' and being 'pointed at, without mercy,' wherever he goes (*PMF*, Ch. VI). By allowing this past calumny to mar his present existence, he is effectively robbed of still more masculinity. This idea of a dark skin coupled with an even darker past again recalls the feminized racial others in *Armada*, *The Moonstone* and *Heart and Science*.

Oscar is, of course, innocent of the charge brought against him, a fact proven by his brother, Nugent, to whom he realizes he owes his life. This does not, however, mean that Oscar is wholly without, or incapable of, sin. Thrown into a far from heroic panic lest Lucilla, who has a 'blind horror of anything dark' (*PMF*, Ch. III), which she associates with 'all that is vile and horrible and devilish' (*PMF*, Ch. XXXIII), discover the truth about his disfigurement, he first of all endeavours to entrap her into an early marriage, before she can learn of his affliction, and then, albeit out of cowardice, not malice, allows her to believe that it is his brother's skin which is discoloured.

When Lucilla has eventually been restored to him, and Nugent's schemes have been thwarted, Collins creates a touching scene of fraternal reconciliation.

[Nugent] threw one arm in his old easy protecting way round his brother. His hand, as he did this, touched the breast-pocket of Oscar's coat. Before it was possible to stop him, his dexterous fingers had opened the pocket, and had taken from it a little toy-pistol with a chased silver handle of Oscar's own workmanship.

'Was this for me?' he asked, with a faint smile. 'My poor boy! you could never have done it, could you? He kissed Oscar's dark cheek, and put the pistol into his own pocket. (*PMF*, Ch. L)

The pistol, a phallic symbol *par excellence*, and Oscar's inability to use it, further emphasize his impotence and emasculation. The fact that the gun is small and

delicately wrought add to this image. As Nugent departs the scene, he may leave Lucilla behind, but he takes with him, safely tucked away in his pocket, what little remains of his brother's manhood.

Collins, then, by creating a 'hero' who is at once a coward, an embodiment of the estranged racial other, and a metaphorical eunuch, clearly subverts the dominant image of nineteenth-century male supremacy. Even at the end of the novel, when Oscar and Lucilla are happily married with healthy, genetically sound children of their own, we are left with the distinct impression that this might not have been the case had they not had the beneficent eye of 'Auntie' Pratolungo watching over them, in the same way that Marian Halcombe, in *The Woman in White*, watches over the emasculated Walter Hartright and his feeble wife, Laura, and makes sure that they behave themselves in a manner befitting their husbandly and wifely stations in life.

Nugent's past, in contrast with his brother's, is bright and glowing with heroism. In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, he has single-handedly proven his brother innocent of the charge of murder, and thus rescued him from the gallows. He is described by Oscar as 'the noblest creature God ever created,' 'an angel,' 'a hero,' 'a genius' (*PMF*, Ch. IX), and is otherwise portrayed in terms which would indeed seem to fit him for the role of hero. That he may have slightly less than saintly tendencies is first hinted at when we learn that he abandoned the friendless Oscar in Dimchurch whilst he himself went off to America in search of new landscapes to paint. Even this does not seem very wicked, except to Madame Pratolungo, since we must remember that he has forsaken his burgeoning career as a landscape artist, and the reputation he was beginning to gain in his own name, in order to preserve Oscar's anonymity. In any case, when we eventually meet Nugent, he acquits himself well. Despite their similarities—the two are 'exactly alike in their height, in their walk, in their features, and in their voices,' and Nugent possesses 'the complexion which Oscar had lost forever (just a shade darker perhaps)' (*PMF*, Ch. XXIII)—Nugent is a much more manly version of his twin. He is charming, outspoken, and self-confident. As far as Madame Pratolungo is concerned, he comes 'much nearer than his brother did to [her] ideal of

the dash and resolution which ought to distinguish a man on the right side of thirty' (*PMF*, Ch. XXV).

Nevertheless, whereas Oscar is feminized by his physical otherness and his emotional weakness, Collins also emasculates Nugent, albeit in a somewhat different way. Instead of bestowing upon him essentially female characteristics, he chooses to depict him as a spoiled child, who, although not fundamentally wicked, falls into mischievous ways and bad behaviour through his own intrinsic selfishness and lack of consideration for those around him. He never intends to misbehave; but he is self-seeking and 'the most opinionated man in existence' (*PMF*, Ch. XXIII). As William Marshall observes, 'Nugent is no villain in any absolute sense, but, like Geoffrey Delamayn, he moves from one amoral commitment to another until he has reached the point that he expresses himself in acts which society must regard as immoral.'<sup>17</sup> His nature is adventurous, his attention-span is short, and his world is a fantasy one in which he, and he alone, is the all-conquering hero. His absence in America attests to this: he has gone 'to found a school of landscape painting. On an immense scale. A scale that has never been attempted yet' (*PMF*, Ch. IX). That he is able to convince Oscar of the viability of his scheme is attributable partly to Nugent's stronger character, and partly to the childlike element also present in Oscar that permits such blind devotion and unquestioning belief in his brother's superiority.

Until the very end of the novel, Oscar continues to view his brother through rose-tinted spectacles. It is, however, possible to see Nugent from quite a different perspective, and to interpret his actions not as heroic, but as self-aggrandizing. His brother adopts a pseudonym to escape the stigma of having been involved in a murder trial, and Nugent does the same, but not necessarily, as Oscar would have us believe, out of fellow-feeling for his twin, but, perhaps, because he does not wish to be linked with a suspected murderer, or because he knows that this is the way to obtain Oscar's

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<sup>17</sup> Marshall, p. 94.

gratitude. His saving of Oscar from the gallows, in itself a noble action, can be construed to have been motivated by a thirst for glory and, again, for fraternal gratitude. Even his notion that Lucilla's sight may be restored is perhaps not as philanthropic in origin as it appears. His proposal that Herr Grosse should perform the operation is made before he has met his brother's fiancée, and before he learns of her aversion to dark colours. He clearly has no wish to cause a rift between her and Oscar at this stage, and yet, I would argue, his own interests are paramount. He has found 'the greatest living authority, and greatest living operator, in diseases of the eye' (*PMF*, Ch. XXIII), and thus will be able to take the credit for Lucilla's recovery. But it is not Lucilla's gratitude that he craves—he has not met her; she is merely an object to him, as, indeed, she will remain—the gratitude Nugent wants is, as ever, Oscar's.

From the start of the novel, then, Nugent's behaviour is less that of a grown man, than that of an insecure child, who will do whatever is necessary to win the praise of his superiors and the envy of his peers. When Oscar realizes himself to be in love with Lucilla, he behaves with all the bashful correctitude more properly befitting a young girl, and it is she, whose very blindness precludes her from being regarded as one of Collins's 'masculine' heroines, who must set the pace of their courtship. Nugent, at first, seems to be equally daunted by Lucilla: his usual self-confidence disappears, and:

[...] a marked change was beginning to assert itself in his manner.

Little by little, an unnatural constraint got possession of him. His fluent tongue found nothing to talk about. His easy movements altered in the strangest way, until they became the movements of a slow awkward man. He was more like his brother than ever. (*PMF*, Ch. XXIV)

More like his brother in outward appearance he may be, but as Oscar has already remarked, 'people say there is no difference between us [but] people are so shallow' (*PMF*, Ch. IX).

As Nugent becomes aware of the strength of his desire for Lucilla, the insecure child, whose self-doubt manifests itself in over-confidence, is replaced by the naughty, wilful child who will resort to deceit and trickery if that is the only way in which he can achieve his ends. This childish desire for possession is accentuated by his

objectification of Lucilla. He ceases to regard her as a person in her own right: she has become nothing more than a coveted but forbidden plaything. He knows that she loves his brother, not him, and that eventually she will learn of his imposture and resent him for it. Children, however, do not think of the future.

Nevertheless, Nugent's 'borrowing' of his brother's persona cannot be wholly ascribed to the capricious fancy of a child, unless it be a singularly calculating and devious child. In this regard, if in no other, Nugent shows signs of definite adulthood, but, given that duplicity and scheming are vices normally attributed to women, he, like his brother, can be seen to be a feminized adult.<sup>18</sup>

It is, of course, Oscar, not Nugent, who first sets in motion the exchange of identities, but the idea has long been in Nugent's mind. When he learns that the liaison between his twin and Lucilla began because of her attraction to his voice, the information 'dwelt strangely on his mind [...] "The sound of his voice!" he said to himself, still turning the problem over and over in his mind. "People say my voice is exactly like Oscar's," he added' (*PMF*, Ch. XXV). From this point onwards, Nugent's character becomes increasingly treacherous, until he virtually incarcerates his unsuspecting bride-to-be in the house of his—and Oscar's—cousin.

That she is unsuspecting depends largely upon her mistrust of her newly acquired sense of sight, and even when her blindness has returned, regards the brief period of vision as the source of any perceptual differences she now experiences. Having been led to believe that Nugent was the blue brother, she automatically assumed the fairer one to be Oscar. This deception, partly brought about because of Lucilla's intuitively grounded prejudice against dark colours and dark people, anticipates *The Law and the*

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<sup>18</sup> His financial incompetence also attests to his femininity. Both brothers have inherited an equal share of their father's fortune; Oscar manages his wisely, whilst Nugent spends all his, and is now dependent upon his twin for charitable assistance. As Collins previously implied in *No Name* and *The Moonstone*, such financial dependence is in direct conflict with the expectations of patriarchal authority. Nugent, therefore, can be seen to represent a displacement of the normative state of Victorian women—subordinate, dependent, and parasitical.

*Lady*, insofar as feminine identity and contentment are shown in both works to be based upon masquerade and illusion.

The skin colour of the two brothers is of central importance to the plot, and to the roles of hero and villain played by Oscar and Nugent. Collins both accepts and subverts the traditional literary equations of 'fair = good' and 'dark = bad'. Oscar, in his 'natural' condition, we know to have a 'creamy and fair' complexion, whilst Nugent's skin is 'just a shade darker' (*PMF*, Chs. VI, XXIII). The normative representation would, therefore, demand that Oscar be the 'good' twin, and Nugent 'just a shade' less so. However, by dyeing his 'good' character dark blue, Collins brings into doubt the validity of such conjectural assumptions.



Just as masquerade, impersonation, and subjective truth play a large part in *Poor Miss Finch*, so *The Law and the Lady* relies heavily on deception, false appearances and reversed perceptions. More reminiscent than any other of the later works of Collins's novels of the 1860s in terms both of its sensationalism, and of its dramatic revelations, the story is told, somewhat unreliably, by Valeria Macallan, who relates the events leading up to and immediately following her marriage to Eustace Macallan. Here, once again, Collins presents us with an emasculated, impotent 'hero', whose present existence, like that of Oscar Dubourg and of Lewis Romaine in *The Black Robe*, is overshadowed by a guilty secret in his past.

Eustace, like Oscar before him, has been accused—falsely as events will reveal—of murder, and when we first meet him, he is, again like Oscar, masquerading under an assumed name. Macallan's history is not, however, a simple reworking of Oscar's despite these similarities. Although the trial of the latter plays an important part in the overall chain of events in *Poor Miss Finch*, it is not the fulcrum of those events as it is in *The Law and the Lady*. Furthermore, Oscar was acquitted, whereas Macallan, judged by a Scottish court, must now live with the stigma of having the verdict 'Not Proven'

passed on him. The shame of this is too much for him and, where Oscar confessed his shameful secret to Madame Pratolungo, and through her to Lucilla, Eustace chooses instead to hide behind a web of deception. Valeria, once married, makes the discovery of the secret for herself, and as Eustace flees the country, she is left to unravel the mystery and thus clear her husband's name, something he, himself, has never been man enough to do. Once she has fulfilled her goal, Eustace is at last able, albeit unconvincingly, to resume his role of husband, with all its concomitant masculine implications.

It is impossible to discuss Collins's treatment of Macallan without some reference to Valeria. Not only is the story told from her perspective, it also revolves around her. Whereas the wives in *Poor Miss Finch* and *The Black Robe* show some predatory instincts, they are, on the whole, the victims of their husbands' inadequacies, or of their husbands' rivals' machinations, Valeria turns the tables: she does, it is true, suffer from the shortcomings of her husband, but she is nonetheless the dominant partner in her marriage, and it is she, not a twin brother or a religious vocation, who effectively emasculates her husband, stamping her authority not only on the narrative but on her marriage as well.

*The Law and the Lady* begins with the concluding words of the Marriage Service of the Church of England, and the affirmation of the legal state of marriage as the wife's subjection to her husband's will. At this early stage in the novel, it does indeed seem that Valeria complies with the typical image of the young wife. At the wedding ceremony, she is bewildered, confused, her fingers tremble, and she makes a mistake when signing the marriage register. Eustace, on the other hand, is fully in control both of the situation and of his patriarchal authority. Valeria tells us that, in a display of masculine vigour and virility, 'he folded me in his great strong arms, and he gave me a kiss which must certainly have been heard by the idlers waiting [...] outside the church door' (LL, Ch. I)

Nevertheless, Collins appears reluctant to allow his readers to become too enamoured of his bridegroom, and describes him in terms which are clearly at odds with the prevailing stereotypical image of masculinity. Even Valeria, who, we will come to realize, has a habit of regarding Eustace and his transgressions through the same rose-tinted spectacles as those worn by Oscar Dubourg when viewing his brother's shortcomings, paints for us a far from attractive portrait of her future husband. He is, she tells us:

A man who is not quite so tall as I am, and who has the misfortune of looking older than his years. His forehead is prematurely bald. His big chestnut-coloured beard and his long overhanging moustache are already streaked with grey [...] His smile is rare and sweet; his manner, perfectly quiet and retiring, has yet a latent persuasiveness in it which is (to women) irresistibly winning. He halts a little in his walk, from the effect of an injury received in past years [...] and he carries a thick bamboo cane, with a crutch handle [...] to help himself along whenever he gets on his feet, indoors or out. (*LL*, Ch. I)

So, short, ageing, and lame, Eustace Macallan (or Woodville, as we still believe him to be called) is a somewhat unprepossessing example of manhood from the start. The fact that he does not represent the disabled half of the split protagonist, that distinction being left to Miserrimus Dexter, who is discussed later, further weakens his hold on his claim to manhood: he is not truly manly, merely comparatively so. Eustace, then, who, Jenny Bourne Taylor remarks, 'bears an unmistakable physical resemblance to Collins himself,' is thus enabled to assume the status of able-bodied 'hero', and lest we might doubt that fact, Valeria hastens to reassure us that, 'there is nothing infirm or old or awkward about him; his slight limp when he walks has (perhaps to my partial eyes) a certain quaint grace of its own' (*LL*, Ch. I) <sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Jenny Bourne Taylor, Introduction, *The Law and the Lady*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. xvii. Catherine Peters, however, identifies three 'proto-Wilkie Collinses' in *The Law and the Lady*: Eustace, 'whose very kindness and incapacity to face hard fact make him unintentionally brutal to both his wives;' Major Fitz-David, whose house is modelled on Collins's own; and Miserrimus Dexter, although 'he is only an author-surrogate in a generalized sense' (pp. 373, 374).



The resemblance to Collins does not go beyond the physical. The author was possessed of an 'indomitable spirit' and a 'genial current of [...] soul,' qualities which Macallan certainly lacks.<sup>20</sup> At the first sign that there might be some opposition to his marrying Valeria, he is prepared to break off the engagement and disappear from the scene. Such defeatism would certainly seem completely to divorce him from his 'indomitable' creator. Nevertheless, once Valeria, in a display of feminine panic rather than feminine strength, has assured him that she 'must and will' be his wife, that existence without him is impossible, and, perhaps most importantly of all, that she is *only* a woman, his masculinity reasserts itself, and he comforts her, assuring her that all will be well.

All is not well, however, as Valeria soon discovers, following a chance meeting with her new mother-in-law. The latter appears completely oblivious of any connexion between herself and Eustace's bride. Macallan's bizarre explanation of his mother's conduct is evidently—even to the smitten Valeria—a fabrication of the most unconvincing nature:

It was all forced; it was all unnatural. He, the most delicate, the most refined of men—a gentleman in the highest sense of the word—was coarse and loud and vulgar! My heart sank under a sudden sense of misgiving which, with all my love for him, it was impossible to resist. In unutterable distress and alarm I asked myself: 'Is my husband beginning to deceive me? Is he acting a part, and acting it badly, before we have been married a week? [...]

'Why she didn't even recognise my name!' I burst out. 'Twice over, the landlady called me Mrs Woodville in your mother's hearing—and, twice over, I declare to you on my word of honour, it failed to produce the slightest impression on her. She looked, and acted, as if she had never heard her own name before in her life.'

"Acted" is the right word,' he said, just as composedly as before. 'The women on the stage are not the only women who can act.' (LL, Ch. IV)

Valeria's sudden realization that 'the idol of [her] worship; the companion, guide, protector of [her] life' can 'stoop to such shameless prevarication as this' (LL, Ch. IV) marks the turning point in their relationship. Until now, Valeria has assumed the role of submissive 'angel' without question, but from this point, as she gradually becomes

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<sup>20</sup> Frederick Lehmann, *Memories of Half a Century* (London: Smith, Elder, 1908), p. 30.

increasingly aware that the man she has married is rather less than the ideal husband she had believed him to be, their roles begin to be reversed. It is she who takes over as the guide and protector of her husband's life, and, as her power grows, so his wanes. This chapter is also significant in that it shows Collins's own misgivings about the acceptable face of (gentle)manliness. Although Valeria regards the change to vulgarity as being 'forced' and 'unnatural', it is clear that Collins is condemning all those who are unable—whether through a lack of courage, or through society's prescriptive stance, or a combination of the two—to live life openly, without recourse to disguise. Well might he have said: 'The *men* on the stage are not the only *men* who can act.' The fact that Eustace not only lies about his mother's conduct, but also attributes it to 'Eccentricity'—believed in the nineteenth century to be the precursor of actual insanity—further compounds his unfitness for the title of gentleman: he is not merely maligning an icon of Victorian worship; he is, in addition, implying that he, and his children after him, may not be wholly free from the taint of hereditary madness. Fortunately for him, he is a far from accomplished liar, and Valeria instantly sees through his contrivance—a minor point, but one which, again, proves her superiority and his manly ineptitude.

On his knees, Eustace confesses his falsehood—but without, of course, also confessing the truth behind it—and the forgiving Valeria gently helps him to his feet. Already, then, she has adopted the masculine role for herself, leaving that of the dependent female, or child, to Eustace. As the story progresses, we learn, as Valeria learns, that Macallan has lied about his true identity, has been previously married, and has been tried for the murder of his first wife. Eustace, unable to face a second wife who knows so much about him, flees the country, leaving his bride of six days to find out the truth about his past and thus clear his name.

The past which Valeria unearths is not one of which her husband can be proud. Throughout the story, Collins systematically disrupts poor Eustace's patriarchal authority. Whilst the latter is technically, if not morally, innocent of causing his first wife's death—she committed suicide because of his indifferent and neglectful

treatment of her—his shortcomings are many. We learn from various sources that he is lacking in emotional fortitude. The death of the woman he abhorred prostrates him, and the investigating officers found him to be ‘quite incapable of exerting himself and quite unfit to see strangers. [...] All he did was to close his eyes, as if he was too feeble to speak’ (*LL*, Ch. XVII).<sup>21</sup> His inability to withstand the pressures of the trial is also documented: ‘When he withdrew at the close of the third day [...] he was so depressed and exhausted that he was obliged to lean on the arm of the governor of the jail’ (*LL*, Ch. XVIII). The sight of his mother in the courtroom reduces him to tears, and when the verdict of ‘Not Proven’ is given, he leaves the court with ‘his head sunk on his breast—not looking at any one’ (*LL*, Ch. XX). His own mother, whom one would imagine to have a favourably prejudiced view of her child, condemns him as ‘weak in his way of judging; weak in his way of acting; and like all weak people, headstrong and unreasonable to the last degree’ (*LL*, Ch. XXIII).

Valeria, who might be expected to show some exasperation, if not disgust, at the weakness of her chosen mate, feels nothing but compassion for him, and this compassion, coupled with the exhortations of her friends to abandon her quest, only serves to increase her determination to vindicate his good name—and, by extension, her own. This determination places her in many situations which would have been regarded by contemporary readers as unsuitable for a young woman of good breeding. She refuses to be released by her husband, she reads transcripts of trials, and her relationship with Miserrimus Dexter must surely come very close to crossing the boundaries of propriety. Ultimately, she comes within a hair’s breadth of the truth, when, in a curious act of containment, Collins has her return, conveniently but implausibly pregnant, to the now repentant Eustace, and to her prescribed position of

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<sup>21</sup> The attitude of Eustace here, as earlier in the novel, echoes Ezra Jennings’s view of his past: ‘I cannot bring myself to acknowledge what the accusation is. And I am incapable, perfectly incapable, of proving my innocence. [...] At the outset of my career in this country, the vile slander to which I have referred struck me down at once and for ever’ (*TM*, *The Story*, Second Narrative, Ch. IX).

wife and mother.<sup>22</sup> Collins further denies her 'masculine' achievements by allowing the truth to be discovered more by chance than by Valeria's deductions and intuition. According to O'Neill,

Collins has undermined the entire narrative by this move. The thrust of the novel implies that it is via Valeria's investigations that the Scottish verdict will be rescinded. But, then at the close of the work, it is explained that Valeria's victory is purely fortuitous.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, the damage has been done: the reader is fully aware that Eustace has been vindicated by the efforts of his wife, regardless of the element of chance added, it could be argued, to make Valeria a more acceptably feminine figure in the eyes of Collins's contemporary readers, and there can be no doubt that, under the new terms of their union, Valeria will be the dominant partner. Her ascendancy is reinforced towards the end of the novel, when, having learned the results of the enquiries she had previously set in motion, she resists her first impulse to share her knowledge with her husband. Instead she requests that he accept his vindication, but, for his own peace of mind, spare himself the potentially distressing details of its accomplishment. We are, of course, reminded that when Eustace requested of Valeria that she should accept the knowledge she had, and not endeavour to find out more about the past, she ignored his entreaty, but Eustace like the obedient child he has come to represent, submits to the superior will and wisdom of his young wife. Thus, having saved both her marriage and her husband's good name,<sup>24</sup> Valeria is able to dedicate herself to the prescribed roles of wife and mother — 'with a lord and master who is,' as Sue Lonoff puts it, 'kind,

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<sup>22</sup> Here, as in *Man and Wife*, and elsewhere, Collins shows his apparent ignorance of pregnancy and its manifestations. Valeria must have been aware of her condition for some considerable time, and it would seem that, by the time she returns to her husband, the signs of imminent motherhood must be very noticeable indeed.

<sup>23</sup> O'Neill, p. 210.

<sup>24</sup> This vindication may not, however, be quite so complete as Collins seems to imply. Oscar Dubourg was, after all, found not guilty of a murder, and yet felt the need to assume a false identity in order to avoid the stigma attached merely to having been suspected of such a crime. Macallan, then, may be able to hold his head up in the family circle, but his acceptance of and by society in general remains uncertain.

gentle, and manifestly her subordinate.’<sup>25</sup> And, just in case there can be any doubt in the reader’s mind as to whether, once all his troubles are behind him, Eustace might now relinquish his unmasculine position, Collins ends the novel with Valeria’s ‘postscript’: ‘Don’t bear hardly, good people, on the follies and errors of my husband’s life. Abuse *me* as much as you please. But pray think kindly of Eustace, for my sake’ (LL, Ch. L).

Collins may have intended his story to have a happy ending, but, from a modern standpoint, that cannot be. As Peters states, ‘in the end [Valeria] discovers more than she really wants to know about [her husband]—more, indeed, than he knows about himself.’<sup>26</sup> This is emphasized in the irony of Eustace’s somewhat petulant complaint, in the antepenultimate chapter, that *he* has no secrets from his wife.

The discoveries Valeria makes gradually reveal a picture of a man who is nothing more than a parody of the masculine ideal he vainly struggles to uphold. ‘Curious!’ muses Dexter, upon learning the extent to which Valeria professes to love her husband;

‘Eustace’s first wife loved him, too. There are some men whom the women all like; and there are other men whom the women never care for. Without the least reason for it in either case. The one man is just as good as the other; just as handsome, as agreeable, as honourable, as high in rank as the other. And yet, for Number One, they will go through fire and water; and for Number Two, they won’t so much as turn their heads to look at him. Why? [...] Is there a physical reason for it? Is there some potent magnetic emanation from Number One, which Number Two doesn’t possess?’ (LL, Ch. XXVIII)

In the case of Eustace Macallan, the reader is as mystified as Dexter.

The women with whom Macallan comes into contact—Valeria, his mother, his first wife, and his adored Mrs Beaulieu—all love him, and all abuse him in some way. Valeria, as we know, disregards his orders with regard to the investigation of his past, thus, within

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<sup>25</sup> Lonoff, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Peters, p. 373.

days, severely denting, if not actually breaking, her marriage vows of subjection to her husband. Mrs Macallan Senior is another woman who shows scant regard for Eustace's wishes: having been requested to 'say nothing when you see [Valeria], which can recall me to her memory' (*LL*, Ch. XXVI), she proceeds to discuss him at some length, and even goes so far as to allow her daughter-in-law to read his letter. Sara Macallan, Eustace's first wife, tricked her husband into purchasing arsenic for her to use for cosmetic purposes by leading him to believe he was buying rat poison. She also kept secret from him the unwelcome advances made to her by Dexter. Even his would-be paramour, Helena Beaulieu—whose constancy is to be doubted, given her readiness to abandon Eustace after the trial in favour of 'some wonderful baths in Hungary or Bohemia' (*LL*, Ch. XXXI)—dominates him. Whilst he would, we are given to understand, happily enter into an adulterous affair with his beautiful cousin, as his first wife lies ill in bed, Mrs Beaulieu's passion burns less ardently: "I come to see you, Eustace," she tells him, "as a sister. You must receive me as a brother, or not receive me at all" (*LL*, Ch. XVIII). As usual, Eustace submits.

His liaison with Mrs Beaulieu also undermines not only the ethos of the sanctity of marriage, but also the notion that the husband is its defender and champion. We know that Macallan would not have married Sara if she had not compromised her reputation by being found in his bedchamber. Peters suggests that 'he married her out of kindness not love,'<sup>27</sup> a view which is somewhat debatable. Given the inherent selfishness and cowardice of Eustace, and the fact that Sara's uncle had a 'private conversation' with Eustace immediately before the latter 'publicly declared that [Sara] had visited him as his betrothed wife' (*LL*, Ch. XVIII), it could be argued that Eustace was, in fact, bullied into the marriage, and, subconsciously, in his half-hearted, ineffectual way, spent the rest of his married life avenging himself on the woman who had entrapped him. That he was never physically cruel to her is not in doubt, but throughout the novel, Collins reminds us of Macallan's callous indifference and contempt for her:

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<sup>27</sup> Peters, p. 372.

'The effort of my life is not to notice her, in anything she says or does. How could I keep my temper unless I kept as much as possible out of the way of private interviews with her? And I do keep my temper. I am never hard on her; I never use harsh language to her. She has a double claim on my forbearance—she is a woman; and the law has made her my wife. I remember this; but I am human. The less I see of her—except when visitors are present—the more certain I can feel of preserving my self control.

'I wonder what it is that makes her so utterly distasteful to me. She is a plain woman; but I have seen uglier women than she, whose caresses I could have endured, without the sense of shrinking that comes to me when I am obliged to submit to *her* caresses.' (LL, Ch. XVIII)

The reason he gives for being unable to reciprocate his first wife's sentiments is that he is in love with Mrs Beaulieu, a woman who adventurously sneaks out to disreputable balls in Edinburgh, and complains that her admirer is 'strait-laced' (LL, Ch. XXXI). Eustace, we know, decided to discontinue the relationship with Mrs Beaulieu after the trial, but what we do not know is whether or not his feelings for her have abated since meeting Valeria. We are twice told that:

Mrs Beaulieu had been a witness of the public degradation of [Eustace]. That was enough in itself to prevent him from marrying her. He broke off with her for the same reason which had led him to separate himself from [Valeria]. Existence with a woman who knew that he had been tried for his life as a murderer, was an existence which he had not resolution enough to face. (LL, Ch. XLIX)<sup>28</sup>

Given that he is, by the end of the novel, vindicated of the calumny against him, and that his living once again with Valeria, clearly proves that he has developed 'resolution enough' to face existence with a woman who knows that 'he had been tried for his life as a murderer,' why should that woman not be Mrs Beaulieu? Certainly not because Valeria's devotion must be rewarded by Eustace's love: he never saw fit to reward Sara's devotion in this way. Moreover, as Dexter persists in remarking, Valeria bears a striking resemblance in terms of her figure and her walk to her predecessor, surely a distasteful

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28 This quotation comes from the second occasion on which Eustace's decision to give up Mrs Beaulieu is discussed. The first occasion is in Chapter XXX, and whilst there is a slight difference in wording, the only significant variation is that the phrase 'which he had not resolution enough to face' reads 'which he was not hero enough to face.' Eustace, I would suggest, may be capable of developing 'resolution', but he will never be able truly to aspire to the rank of 'hero'.

similarity in Eustace's eyes. Indeed there is already evidence to suggest that his feelings for his second wife are less intense than her interpretation of them implies. His willingness to end their engagement and subsequently to release her from her marriage vows do not suggest a man whose ardour cannot be dampened, although both acts could possibly be construed as manifestations of some misplaced sense of honour on his part. His first rejection of her physical display of affection—'[I] threw my arms round his neck, and kissed him. The embrace was not returned. He passively submitted—nothing more' (*LL*, Ch. XII)—coming as it does, immediately after Valeria's discovery of the 'Scotch Verdict', may, likewise, be justified as the effect of the trauma of discovery, but once their reconciliation has finally taken place, his hesitancy to kiss his wife until 'there was no choice for him but to yield' (*LL*, Ch. XLVIII), echoes ominously the pressure brought upon him to marry Sara, and most certainly does not augur well for their future life together. Collins's happy ending is, I would suggest, wholly dependent on Mrs Beaulieu's remaining in Hungary or Bohemia for a very long time.

Eustace, then, because of his feebleness of character, his selfishness, and his potential infidelity, cannot be considered as a champion of masculine supremacy. Collins, however, is not content to question the stereotypical ideal in these ways alone. He is also anxious to imply that patriarchal authority has, perhaps, never existed: 'My poor wretched son,' laments Mrs Macallan Senior, 'he takes after his father; he isn't the least like Me!' (*LL*, Ch. XXIII)

An equally disparaging opinion is held by the elder Mrs Macallan of Miserrimus Dexter, whom she condemns superciliously as a harmless madman (*LL*, Ch. XXIII). The reader, however, cannot be so dismissive: Collins creates his most memorable 'rival' for the heroine's affection in his disturbing portrait of this physical 'other'. Contemporary critics constantly found Dexter an unacceptable figure, incomprehensible as well as macabre. From J. L. Stewart's view that 'this type of physical, mental and moral deformity is exhausted, and should be banished from fiction,' through Nuel Pharr Davis's now politically incorrect opinion that, to appreciate Dexter, 'one must have



sympathies that can extend to a legless, lustful lunatic in a wheelchair,' to Ellen Moer's contemptuous dismissal of him as a 'horrible effeminate dwarf,' Dexter's physical peculiarity has always been the source of some unease.<sup>29</sup> His character and behaviour are presented as exaggerations of familiar cultural stereotypes, but in Dexter these have been deconstructed and reassembled in a grotesque parody of the norm:

A strange and startling creature—literally the half of a man—revealed himself to the general view. A coverlid, which had been thrown over his chair, had fallen off during his progress through the throng. The loss of it exposed to the public curiosity the head, the arms, and the trunk of a living human being: absolutely deprived of the lower limbs. To make this deformity all the more striking and all the more terrible, the victim of it was—unusually handsome, and an unusually well-made man. His long silky hair, of a bright and beautiful chestnut colour, fell over shoulders that were the perfection of strength and grace. His face was bright with vivacity and intelligence. His large, clear blue eyes, and his long delicate white hands, were like the eyes and hands of a beautiful woman. He would have looked effeminate, but for the manly proportions of his throat and chest. (LL, Ch. XX)

Dexter might not be effeminate, as such, but he is certainly feminized. The loss of the coverlid also highlights his unmanliness, and offers an inverted perspective on the more traditional image of female self-revelation, which, according to Elaine Showalter, 'can be a shocking act, for female unveiling substitutes power for castration.'<sup>30</sup> For Dexter, however, this unveiling substitutes castration, or at least impotence, for traditional male power. This scene must surely have provoked a strong reaction in its Victorian readers, although not because the prospect of glimpsing an uncovered limb was shocking. Rather, the sight would have aroused pleasurable horror, such as might have been experienced at a particularly bizarre exhibit in one of the many freak shows so popular in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The discomfort suffered by the socially aware modern reader when he realizes, as Dexter's coverlid falls from the

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29 Stewart, 'Wilkie Collins as a Novelist'; quoted in Lonoff, p. 163; Nuel Pharr Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), p. 282; Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (New York: Viking, 1960), p. 242.

30 *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 156

chair, that it is not the man's legs which are being exposed, but rather the lack of them, is potentially more acute than was the embarrassment suffered by the contemporary reader.

Moreover, whilst nineteenth-century editors, publishers, and readers would have been unable to countenance any even more explicit references, some modern critics have chosen to infer that Dexter's physical deformity, his half-manness, his impotence mentioned above, should be interpreted as going somewhat beyond an absence of lower limbs. O'Neill, for example, considers that Dexter suffers from a 'symbolic and literal lack of the phallus,' although notes that there would appear to be something contradictory in 'the fact that his voice is not that of a castrato.'<sup>31</sup> There may even be evidence to suppose that Dexter's malady is caused by some form of congenital syphilis, and certainly this interpretation is not one which would have escaped Collins's syphilophobic readers. According to Pearsall, it was believed that the sufferer from that disease:

[...] has delusions of grandeur, thinks up vast schemes, is emotionally chaotic. This is the transitional stage. As the nervous system crumples, the patient reverts to childishness, crawls about on the floor, cannot control his evacuations, eventually subsides into mindlessness, followed remorselessly by death.<sup>32</sup>

Certainly, Dexter manifests all but the most scatological of these symptoms (an understandable omission on Collins's part), during the course of the novel. Given that Dexter's condition is, then, one with which he was born, and not the result of a terrible accident, he would seem to conform to the Freudian notion of woman as castrated male. Elizabeth Janeway, commenting on Freud's 'Female Sexuality', raises several points which apply with every bit as much—if not more—accuracy to Dexter as they do to women, thus confirming his feminization:

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<sup>31</sup> O'Neill, pp. 205, 206.

<sup>32</sup> Pearsall, p. 229.

No woman has been deprived of a penis; she never had one to begin with. But she *has* been deprived of something else that men enjoy: namely, autonomy, freedom, and the power to control her destiny. By insisting, falsely, on female deprivation of the male organ, Freud is pointing to an actual deprivation and one of which he was clearly aware. In Freud's time the advantages enjoyed by the male sex over the inferior female were, of course, even greater than at present, and they were also accepted to a much larger extent, as being inevitable, inescapable. Women were evident *social* castrates, and the mutilation of their potentiality as achieving human creatures was quite analogous to the physical wound.<sup>33</sup>

Dexter's social castration is evident, and he must essentially be excluded from a society whose expectations are at best only partly attainable for him. His reclusive existence again highlights his feminization by recalling the restricted lives of the genteel, ladylike postulants of the nineteenth-century cult of invalidism. By virtue of his disability, then, he cannot discover or defend in the truly masculine sense of the words, although he can, and does, use his intellect to speculate and invent.<sup>34</sup> In accordance with Ruskin's definition, then, he is still only 'the half of a man.'

Despite Dexter's shunning of the outer world, he cannot be wholly equated with his unhealthy female counterparts. His energetic self-propelling in his wheel chair, coupled with his bizarre 'hopping [...] on his hands, at a prodigious speed' (*LL*, Ch. XXIV), contradicts the languorous image of the invalid. As Dijkstra points out, 'to dare to be active and energetic was considered a social *faux pas*.'<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this is not Dexter's only breach of etiquette. Ironically, he possesses much of the libidinal energy which Eustace Macallan appears to lack. Regardless of his physical limitations, he proposes marriage to Sara and makes amorous advances to Valeria. He is not, however, as 'sexually menacing,' as one critic chooses to imply;<sup>36</sup> rather, he resembles, in the

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33 Elizabeth Janeway, 'On "Female Sexuality,"' in *Women and Analysis*; quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 272-73.

34 Valeria first encounters him dramatically re-enacting the lives of Napoleon, Nelson and Shakespeare (*LL*, Ch. XXIV).

35 Dijkstra, p. 27.

36 Seymour-Smith, *Hardy*, p. 273.

manner of Nugent Dubourg, a spoiled child who has not yet become aware that he cannot always have everything that he wants.

The scene in which he attempts to embrace Valeria, which, for reasons of propriety, was partially expunged from the serial version of the novel, is one of the subtler and more insidious examples of Dexter's childishness.<sup>37</sup> In what Collins described as 'a perfectly innocent passage,' Dexter kisses Valeria's hand, and wraps an arm around her waist. It is not, as Collins was himself at pains to point out, 'an attempted violation of the heroine of the story;' it is simply an example of a little boy, playing adult games, and not quite realizing when he has overstepped the mark.<sup>38</sup> After all, Dexter is not the one who started the game. It was Valeria, who, knowing of Dexter's belief that 'My chair is Me' (*LL*, Ch. XVII), 'laid [her] hand, as if by accident, on the wheel-chair to keep him near [her]' (*LL*, Ch. XXV). How is he, with his child's perceptions, to realize that there is a difference between her behaviour and his? Clearly there must be, of course, for just as Marian Halcombe's ugliness makes her 'not textually available as a wife for Walter,'<sup>39</sup> so Dexter's deformity makes him not textually available as a lover for

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37 When the novel appeared in the *Graphic*, between 26 September 1874 and 13 March 1875, the passage at the end of Chapter XXXV, which, in Collins's original manuscript, and in subsequent editions in book form, reads:

He caught my hand in his, and devoured it with kisses. His lips burnt me like fire. He twisted himself suddenly in the chair, and wound his arm around my waist. In the terror of the moment, vainly struggling with him, I cried out for help,

is replaced by the more innocuous form:

He caught my hand in his and covered it with kisses. In the indignation of the moment I cried out for help.

Collins was incensed by this alteration, and an angry correspondence was carried on between him and the editor of the *Graphic*, who, he felt, had no right to tamper with his manuscript. For further details of this altercation, see the Appendix to the Oxford World Classics edition of *The Law and the Lady*, pp. 415-18.

38 Collins uses these phrases in a letter he wrote to the editor of *The World*, published 24 March 1875, p. 21; reprinted in the Appendix to Oxford World Classics edition of *The Law and the Lady*, pp. 416-18. In the letter he fulminates against the editor of the *Graphic* who saw fit to break their agreement by altering Collins's words, before going on to justify the inclusion of the paragraph in the serial version of the novel. He points out that the abridgement makes certain following allusions nonsensical, and condemns those responsible for 'plac[ing] a nasty interpretation' upon the passage in question.

39 Reynolds and Humble, p. 54.

Valeria. Nevertheless, Dexter's mistake is easily made, and the whole of Chapter XXXV presages the culmination of his error.

Having, earlier in the chapter, arrived at Benjamin's house, Dexter is determined not to leave without seeing Valeria. His fears that she may have heard less than flattering things about his past behaviour, and his desire to state his case at all costs and regardless of appropriateness of such a course of action again highlight his childlike mentality. What the reader—and Valeria—encounter, upon her opening the door to the library is, however, not a child, but a terrifying travesty of a small baby, 'arrayed in his pink jacket, fast asleep in Benjamin's favourite arm-chair! No coverlid hid his horrible deformity. Nothing was sacrificed to conventional ideas of propriety, in his extraordinary dress' (*LL*, Ch. XXXV). Valeria, however, knows that what she beholds is not a baby, but a mature man, some years older than herself. It can, therefore, be considered neither proper nor prudent of her to ask Benjamin to leave her alone with a partially clad member of the opposite sex. If he has not done so before this, the reader, along with Dexter himself, must surely begin to suspect that Valeria's feelings go somewhat further than the self-justifying protestations of pity which she articulates:

Whether I unconsciously drew on that inexhaustible store of indulgence which a woman always keeps in reserve for a man who owns that he has need of her—or whether, resenting as I did Mr Playmore's horrible suspicion of him, my heart was especially accessible to feelings of compassion, in his case—I cannot tell. I only know that I pitied Miserrimus Dexter, at that moment, as I had never pitied him yet; and that I spared him the reproof which I should certainly have administered to any other man, who had taken the liberty of establishing himself, uninvited, in Benjamin's house. (*LL*, Ch. XXXV)

Never having found himself in a situation in which an attractive woman is able to contemplate his deformity with anything other than horror and repugnance, and being aware that his behaviour exceeds the limits of what is acceptable, the only construction he can place upon Valeria's curious leniency is, if Valeria's narratorial admonitions are to be believed, necessarily the wrong one. Like a naughty child who knows that he is not being reprimanded for his mischief, Dexter assumes that he has won Valeria's tacit approval, an impression which Collins does little to dispel. We know that, whilst she

comprehends, she does not share society's aversion towards Dexter, and with typical self-effacement, attempts to defend him:

It may well have been due to want of perception on my part—but I could see nothing mad in him, nothing in any way repelling [...] Looking at him as a whole (and speaking of him, of course, from a woman's, not a physiognomist's point of view), I can only describe him as being an unusually handsome man. A painter would have revelled in him as a model for St John. And a young girl, ignorant of what the Oriental robe hid from view, would have said to herself the instant she looked at him, "Here is the hero of my dreams!" (LL, Ch. XXV)

We also know that she is fascinated by him—'Was there ever such a puzzle of a man as this?' (LL, Ch. XXXV)—and that she is prepared to disregard the advice given to her by her mother-in-law and by Mr Playmore to discontinue her association with him (LL, Chs XXVII, XXXIII). Certainly, then, there is some form of mutual attraction between Valeria and Dexter, but one which is only acceptable to Valeria whilst it is on her terms. For her, despite her attempts to prove that she does not see him with the same eyes as the rest of society, he is nothing more than a plaything—not a baby, not a child, merely a strange, malformed puppet. In this respect, Valeria is every bit as infantilized as Dexter himself: only a particularly imaginative child would be able to lose herself in an imaginary world where even an abused and mistreated doll can become 'the hero of [her] dreams'.

When Valeria tells him what she has learnt about the evening of Sara's death, thus exonerating Mrs Beaully from suspicion, Dexter points out that her findings once again incriminate Eustace. Valeria's consternation at his pronouncement is both telling and prophetic: 'Miserrimus Dexter (to use the popular phrase) had given me more than I had bargained for. He had not only done all that I had anticipated [...] he had actually advanced beyond my limits' (LL, Ch. XXXV). And Valeria's limits are all-important, for they are the rules by which the game must be played; so long as they are observed, she has no qualms about encouraging, even reciprocating, his infatuation. As we already know, 'The women on the stage are not the only women who can act' (LL, Ch. IV). Unfortunately, Dexter does not understand this, any more than he understands that, for Valeria, his status is little higher than that of a rag-doll.

When Dexter fears that Valeria suspects him of having poisoned Sara, he admits he went to the dead woman's room and stole a locket, which he now flings at Valeria. Aware that this is not in the rules of the game, Valeria is confused:

A man in my place might have known what to do. Being only a woman, I yielded to the compassionate impulse of the moment.

I got up and crossed the room to him. I gave him back his locket, and put my hand, without knowing what I was about, on the poor wretch's shoulder. 'I am incapable of suspecting you, Mr Dexter,' I said, gently. 'No such idea ever entered my head. I pity you from the bottom of my heart.'

He caught my hand in his, and devoured it with kisses. His lips burnt me like fire. He twisted himself suddenly in the chair, and wound his arm round my waist. In the terror and indignation of the moment, vainly struggling with him, I cried out for help. (*LL*, Ch. XXXV)

It is significant that Valeria feels terror and indignation in equal measure, and that both these emotions are of but momentary duration. Dexter's feelings, although not documented, must surely be every bit as distressing, and, as events will prove, more lasting in their effect. What price now 'that inexhaustible store of indulgence which a woman always keeps in reserve for a man who owns that he has need of her'? Dexter, clearly, has been a naughty boy, and has broken the rules of the game he never quite understood; Valeria, with the sudden physical contact, has been made aware that she is a married woman whose loyalties should be to her husband, not to some unlikely and implausible hero of her imagination. It is shortly after this incident that Valeria forsakes her 'unwomanly' investigations into Eustace's past and resumes a life of wifely devotion, not, I would suggest, because she begins to accept that her activities have placed her, a woman alone, in jeopardy from unwelcome male advances, but rather because her own fantasies have thus endangered her. Dexter, after all, is not man enough to constitute a real threat, as this scene shows: she may cry out for assistance, but it is clear that she has extricated herself from difficulty some time before anyone comes to her rescue.

Throughout the novel Dexter's childlike qualities are juxtaposed with the feminized ones discussed above. He runs the whole gamut of childish emotions, from inexplicable elation, through fits of pique, to sulky, self-indulgent tantrums, during which 'his eyes

were positively filled with tears—tears of compassion for himself. He looked [up] with the wailing querulous entreaty of a sick child waiting to be nursed' (*LL*, Ch. XXVII). Like a child, he over-tires himself, and exhausted from his exertions, tries to relax by playing the harp, but 'his eyes slowly closed. His head lay back on the chair. He slept with his arms around his harp, as a child sleeps, hugging its last new toy' (*LL*, Ch. XXV). He also possesses the cruelty of a child, a cruelty based not on revenge or gain, simply on spitefulness and—in a distorted reduplication of Valeria's power over him—the ability to inflict suffering on one weaker than himself:

At the word of command, Ariel submissively stretched out one arm towards the dish. Just as she touched a cake with the tips of her fingers, her hand was jerked away by a pull at the string [tied tightly around her wrists], so savagely cruel in the nimble and devilish violence of it [...]. (*LL*, Ch. XL)

Ariel is used throughout the novel to emphasize not only the childish side, but also the feminine side to Dexter's nature: frequent references to the beauty of his head, hair and hands, his love of fine clothes and embroidery, all contrast sharply with the brutish masculinity of his cousin, Ariel, and her attire:

[Valeria] could now see the girl's round, fleshy, inexpressive face, her rayless and colourless eyes, her coarse nose and heavy chin. A creature half-alive; an imperfectly-developed animal in shapeless form, clad in a man's pilot jacket, and treading in a man's heavy laced boots: with nothing but an old red flannel petticoat, and a broken comb in her frowsy flaxen hair, to tell us that she was a woman. (*LL* Ch. XXV)

Ariel is, then, the antithetical complement to Dexter. Whereas he is 'the half of a man', she is 'the half of a woman'. What he lacks is physical strength; what she lacks is mental prowess. Whatever their differences, Ariel is devoted to her 'master'. When she believes Valeria to be angry with Dexter, she goes to her and begs to be punished in his stead:

'You're angry with the Master,' she said. 'Take it out on Me. Here's the stick. Beat me.'

'Beat you!' [Valeria] exclaimed.

'My back's broad,' said the poor creature. 'I won't make a row. I'll bear it. Drat you, take the stick! Don't vex *him*. Whack it out on my back. Beat *me*.' (*LL*, Ch. XXXVI)



Her words, however incongruous they may seem at the time, are curiously similar to those used by Valeria in her 'postscript'. Even Ariel, with all her shortcomings, is, it would seem, the defender of the man she loves.

Dexter, a man who cries like a baby, who torments his devoted servant, and who openly expresses his contempt for the age in which he lives,<sup>40</sup> must, according to contemporary logic, be insane, and yet Collins, using Valeria as his mouthpiece, assures us that Dexter, like Lucilla Finch, is merely freed by disability from many of the social—and, indeed, moral—constraints of society, and is not 'mad, in the true meaning of the word.'

'It seems to me [comments Valeria] that he openly expresses—I admit in a very reckless and boisterous way—thoughts and feelings which most of us are ashamed of as weaknesses, and which we keep to ourselves accordingly [...]. One of our first amusements as children (if we have any imagination at all) is to get out of our characters, and to try the characters of other personages as a change—to be fairies, to be queens, to be anything, in short, but what we really are. Mr Dexter lets out the secret, just as children do—and if that is madness, he is certainly mad.' (LL, Ch. XXVI)

He is, then, in this respect also, only 'the half of a man,' the remainder being child. By reducing him in this manner to the level of an imaginative and wayward infant—in itself an image for displaced feminine dependency—Collins highlights the ambiguous nature of reality and truth as absolutes. This ambiguity is discernible in the pronoun 'It', used by Benjamin's housekeeper to refer to Dexter. As Philip O'Neill points out:

Language does not have a pronoun which can accommodate Dexter. He is neither subject nor object but is totally other and exists on the margins of discourse and society. 'He' is neither masculine nor feminine.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Dexter's explanation of his attire in Chapter XXVII:

'I have dressed [...] in the prettiest clothes I have [...] Except in this ignoble and material nineteenth century, men have always worn precious stuffs and beautiful colours as well as women [...] I despise the brutish contempt for beauty and the mean dread of expense which degrade a gentleman's costume to black cloth, and limit a gentleman's ornaments to a finger ring, in the age I live in.'

<sup>41</sup> O'Neill, p. 206.

Typically, at the same time as creating his negative picture of Dexter, Collins is working to dispel it, and to reveal a different side to Dexter's character. As Valeria asks,

Could a man who was hopelessly and entirely wicked have inspired such devoted attachment to him as Dexter had inspired in the faithful woman [Ariel] who had just left—in the rough gardener who carried him out so gently on the previous night? (*LL*, Ch. XXXVI)

Indeed, Dexter is not 'hopelessly and entirely wicked,' just hopelessly and entirely vain and self-centred. His theft of Sara's death-bed confession was motivated by hurt pride, but 'it is fairly to be doubted whether he was additionally capable of permitting the friend who trusted him to be tried for murder, through his fault, without making an effort to save the innocent man' (*LL*, Ch. XLIX).

External appearances in *The Law and the Lady* may appear, on a superficial level, to be more reliable than those in *Poor Miss Finch*—Eustace's physical weakness is clearly a metaphor for his emotional and moral debility, just as Dexter's bodily deformity is symbolic of his mental distortion—but, even superficially, they do little to uphold the image of the heroic male. Dexter's heroism confines itself to his wildly dramatic flights of fancy, and Eustace's only attempt at bravery, when he foolishly endeavours to assist a fellow soldier in a skirmish in Spain, fails when he himself is wounded, and other men's lives are endangered in his rescue. Both characters, however, are unaware that the image they present to the world is not one of adult courage and wisdom, but one of childish bluster and recklessness. That his two male protagonists are victims of such self-delusion is no accident. Collins's intention is to leave his reader in no doubt that the manly ideal, with its high-minded virtues and conventions, is, at best, illusory, and, at worst, dangerous.

### III

The union of marriage is not often a happy one in Collins's novels. As Lonoff notes 'a marriage between equals is rarely depicted at any length [...], nor do his bridegrooms necessarily remain comfortable with their choices.'<sup>42</sup> Indeed, we have already seen evidence of this in *The Evil Genius* and *Man and Wife*, as well as in *The Law and the Lady*. *The Black Robe* is no exception: it tells the story of the marriage of Lewis Romaine and Stella Eyrecourt, and of his subsequent desertion of her, not, like Eustace Macallan, through shame, or, as in *The Evil Genius*, for another woman, but for the higher calling of the priesthood.

Romaine, in his bachelor days, had found himself involved in a duel, from which he emerged the victor. However, his peace of mind is permanently shattered, and he remains haunted by the voice of his opponent's younger brother, calling him an assassin. His conversion to Roman Catholicism offers him the respite from his mental anguish which his marriage has failed to do. Persuaded by the manipulative Father Benwell that his union with Stella is invalid in the eyes of the church—albeit not so in the eyes of the law—on the grounds that she had previously entered into matrimony with the unknowingly still married Bernard Winterfield, Romaine leaves England. The two are only reconciled, on Romaine's death-bed, when he realizes that wife and son—his child was born during his peregrinations on the continent—mean more to him than the Church. His death leaves the way clear for Winterfield, now absolved of all guilt, to remarry Stella and live happily ever after.

Lewis Romaine is an unusual protagonist, and one who plays a double role in the novel; he enters *The Black Robe* as hero, and leaves it as villain. Collins's first physical description of him comes after the duel, and there can be no doubt that, aesthetically, he leaves little to be desired. He is, according to the infatuated Stella:

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<sup>42</sup> Lonoff, p. 140.

Neither tall nor short—rather thin—quiet and graceful in all his movements—dressed plainly, in perfect taste. [His eyes are] so divinely tender and sad—and the colour of them that dark violet blue, so uncommon and so beautiful—too beautiful for a man. [His hair is light reddish brown, and his beard is] of the same colour; short and curling, like the beards of the Roman heroes one sees in pictures.<sup>43</sup>

Physically, then, he would seem to have no failings. This description of his eyes may hint at some effeminacy, but we must remember that these are Stella's words, and her infatuation may well give rise to hyperbole. Just as, in *The Woman in White*, we have only Hartright's testimony that Marian is 'masculine' and 'ugly', we have only Stella's word that Romaine is, in any way, 'too beautiful for a man.'<sup>44</sup> Moreover, unlike Oscar Dubourg (though not unlike Marian), Romaine has that unmistakable sign of manhood: facial hair. Added to this, we know that he has just killed a man in defence of his honour in a duel, which, although not the most humane manner of settling a difference of opinion, is certainly a very masculine thing to do, and one which offers incontrovertible proof of an adventurous spirit.

Nevertheless, any student of Collins works should instantly be on his guard against Romaine as a representative of the nineteenth-century model man, not because of Stella's slightly feminizing choice of words, nor yet because of Romaine's single act of violence. The reason for caution is that, whether Stella's words are reliable or not, the reader is left with an image of Romaine as a perfect example of male beauty, and beauty in Collins's works is always tainted, in his male characters as well as in his female ones. Only those who lack physical perfection, but fall short of actual deformity, can hope to prosper in a Collins novel.

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43 Wilkie Collins, *The Black Robe* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881; repr. Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1994), Bk. 1, Ch. I.

44 Lyn Pykett observes that 'the reader's perception of Marian Halcombe's "masculinity" is, in large measure, a product of Hartright's conventional perceptual framework through which Marian is mediated' (*The Sensation Novel*, pp. 20-21), and Nina Auerbach discusses the unreliability and subjectivity of Hartright's description of Marian, whom she likens to a 'Pre-Raphaelite "stunner"' (pp. 136-37).

Thus Romaine, it is clear, cannot possibly survive the course of the novel unscathed. Having allowed him to begin so promisingly, Collins hastens to undermine his protagonist as a source of masculine vigour. In the section 'Before the Story,' Romaine appears to have normal sexual appetites: he is not immune to 'the fatal influence of the [female] sex, assisted by wine' (*BR*, Before the Story, Scene I). Just how much assistance the wine provides does not become apparent until he returns to England, to his 'work of immense research, on the Origin of Religions' (*BR*, Bk. 1, Ch. III). Reminiscent of a young Casaubon (without the moles), Romaine prefers studying to flirting, books to women. As Freud indicates, compulsive academic research represents 'a substitute for sexual activity.'<sup>45</sup> Romaine's life has been a reclusive one, and we soon realize that the adventurous spirit evidenced in gambling and duelling is not typical of him. He has not even shown an appreciably active interest in the female sex: he is 'a single man; not compromised by any illicit connection; romantic, sensitive, highly cultivated' (*BR*, Bk. 1, Ch. III). At this stage, he is not so much a feminized or emasculated character, nor even an infantilized one, as a desexualized one.

The subject of Romaine's sexuality is, however, one of the strongest subliminal issues of the novel. Romaine is essentially passive, and in stating his passivity, Collins seems to be directly challenging the kind of reactionary views expressed by the narrator's father, in Tennyson's *The Princess*, who proclaims that:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:  
 Man for the sword and for the needle she:  
 Man with the head and woman with the heart:  
 Man to command and woman to obey.<sup>46</sup>

In the case of Romaine and Stella, the inverse is true. Just as Lucilla determined to dominate Oscar ('I mean to cure him. And I mean to be his wife' (*PMF*, Ch. XV)), so

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<sup>45</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, ed. by Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 170.

<sup>46</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'The Princess', Pt. V, ll. 437-41, in *In Memoriam, The Princess, and Maud*, ed. by John Churnton Collins (London: Methuen, 1902), pp. 143-270.

Stella, with a little help from Lord and Lady Loring, sets to work to command the hapless Romaine, who whilst not actively opposed to the idea, would, we are given to believe, be equally happy to be left to his books and his research into them. This, however, would not have been an acceptable solution, for, as Herbert Sussman points out, 'normative bourgeois masculinity enforces compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory matrimony.'<sup>47</sup>

Lord and Lady Loring, who, as minor characters are allowed to present an image of marital harmony, are instrumental in the scheme to marry Romaine to Stella. They are aware of Romaine's mental disturbances, and feel that marriage must provide the cure. The subject of health, and particularly the fear of congenitally-transmitted syphilis and syphilitic insanity, represented an important consideration in matrimonial choice throughout the nineteenth century, and never more so than at the time Collins was writing his later novels. Eugenicist ideas dictated that the nation's future citizens should come from the best stock. The general view was that 'it is a mooted question whether those in ill-health have a right to marry, and thus run the risk of entailing their diseases upon children.' Those inflicted with hereditary diseases 'had certainly best remain unmarried.'<sup>48</sup> The Lorings, however, have no wish deliberately to sentence Stella to a life of misery. Rather than suspecting some sexual imprudence as the source of Romaine's problems, they clearly subscribe to the popular Victorian belief that overwork, coupled with any form of traumatic event, represented a severe threat to a man's nervous stability.<sup>49</sup> Although women were advised not to marry confirmed invalids, as they would have to assume the roles of housekeeper, nurse and provider for the family, there was a lack of medical consensus about marrying 'neurotic subjects,' since marriage was believed, on the one hand, to provide a cure for some

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<sup>47</sup> Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> George H. Savage, 'Marriage in Neurotic Subjects', *Journal of Mental Science*, 29 (1883), 49-54; quoted in Jalland, pp. 84-85.

<sup>49</sup> See Oppenheim, pp. 141-80.

nervous disturbances, and on the other, to be altogether detrimental to other sufferers. In the 'neurotic subject' under consideration, marriage seems to illustrate the latter part of the theory.

The voices that Romaine heard before his marriage persist, and his paranoia increases, a fact taken advantage of by Father Benwell, who subtly hints that there may be some anomaly in Stella's past. Romaine allows this doubt to prey on his mind, and he becomes distrustful of his wife, and suspicious of her every action. His neuroses, however, can be attributed to some kind of post-traumatic malady, coupled with the guilt he feels at having taken another man's life. Stella's neuroses cannot be so explained. That she suffers from guilt, having decided to keep her previous relationship secret from her husband, is undeniable, even if that guilt is self-inflicted. Her jealousy of her husband's friend and secretary, her prejudices, her meddling and underhand behaviour, however, are not so easily accounted for. In an article entitled 'Bold Words by a Bachelor', Collins had already attacked those wives, whose unfounded jealousy causes them to attempt to separate their husbands from 'the worthiest, the truest, the longest-tried friends,' and whose ignorance makes them unable to appreciate the fact that 'there are other affections in this world, which are noble and honourable, besides those of conjugal and parental origin.'<sup>50</sup> The 'fine sense and [...] delicacy of feeling' (*BR*, Bk. 2, Ch. II) which were detected in Stella before her marriage are soon revealed to be as illusory as the voices in Romaine's head.<sup>51</sup> Her only charms lie in her love for her husband—and this is for the man she has created in her imagination, not for the real man to whom she is married—and her sexual allure, and that, for Romaine, can be of merely transitory interest.

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<sup>50</sup> *Household Words* 14 (1856), 413, 414.

<sup>51</sup> There is, of course, a more mundane explanation for Romaine's auditory persecution. As Reierstad notes:

It is noteworthy that here Collins follows Mrs Radcliffe's technique of the 'explained supernatural.' The dead man's brother, a half-wit, has followed Romaine from France, and it is his actual voice Romaine hears. Yet even after the Voice is explained to the reader, it remains for Romaine a supernatural manifestation of the power of retribution. (p. 406).

Romayne's desexualization is an essential part of the plot: an active and loving husband could not be expected to view the concomitant celibacy of the priesthood with any degree of enthusiasm. However, Stella is so manifestly unsuitable a mate for Romayne, that it is not to be wondered at that he should so soon find his interest in her waning. If we accept that Ruskin's suggestion that a woman should be given 'such knowledge [...] as may enable her to understand, and even to aid, the work of men,'<sup>52</sup> we can see that Casaubon may have felt some form of affection for Dorothea, who possessed this knowledge, and was therefore useful to him, when his sight began to fail, as his amanuensis. Romayne, however, cannot even feel a slight attachment to his wife on these grounds. Upon discovering how long it takes her husband to prepare one page of his great work, she is horrified. "Why do you take all that trouble?" she had gently remonstrated. "It would be just the same to the people, darling, if you did it in half the time" (*BR*, Bk. 3, Ch. IV). He can, however, feel some kinship with the young Jesuit priest, Arthur Penrose, who acts as his secretary, whilst (at first) attempting to convert him to Roman Catholicism.

This relationship brings Romayne's sexuality into question once again. Having established that he has been reduced, by his books, his aural hallucinations, and his uncomprehending wife, from the epitome of Victorian manhood, to something altogether more asexual, we now see him further emasculated in his intimacy with Penrose, the young Jesuit priest who is at first employed, Dorothea-like, as his amanuensis. The nature of this bond is ambivalent, and it has been the cause of some speculation amongst modern critics. Catherine Peters identifies in Romayne 'repressed homosexual feelings,' whilst Sue Lonoff disputes this implication, regarding the relationship between the two men as an archetypal masculine friendship with no sexual connotations whatsoever.<sup>53</sup> In fact, there is evidence to support both of these contentions. Marriage has always been looked on as a possible 'cure' for undesirable

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<sup>52</sup> Ruskin, 'Sesame and Lilies', p. 125.

<sup>53</sup> Peters, p. 398; Lonoff, p. 140.



homosexual urges, and from the beginning of the story, Stella clearly regards Penrose as a rival for Romaine's affections. Whilst her overwhelming desire, however, is to convert him from bachelor into husband, Penrose's chief aspiration is merely to transform him from Protestant into Catholic. That he is devoted to Romaine is unquestionable, but, I would suggest, this closeness stems from a platonic affinity: rather than being a homosexual one, their relationship, an archetype of 'male-bonding,' is, to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term, 'homosocial.' Although, from a late twentieth- or early twenty first-century perspective, Penrose's tendency to regard Romaine as 'my more than friend—my brother in love' (*BR*, Bk. 4, Ch. VI), and even to kiss him, would indicate a certain departure from the heterosexual norm, within the context of the novel, these actions must simply be interpreted as proof of Penrose's sincerity. It is not, as David Hilliard comments:

[...] possible, on the basis of passionate words uttered by mid-Victorians, to make a clear distinction between male affection and homosexual feeling. Theirs was a generation prepared to accept romantic friendships between men simply as friendships without sexual significance,

although, he concedes, it does seem:

[...] inherently possible that young men who were secretly troubled by homosexual feelings that they could not publicly acknowledge may have been attracted by the prospect of devoting themselves to a life of celibacy, in the company of like-minded male friends, as a religiously-sanctioned alternative to marriage.<sup>54</sup>

*The Black Robe* is one of Collins's most misunderstood novels. MacEachen, in common with Lonoff and Peters, regards the novel as 'a full-scale attack on the Jesuits.'<sup>55</sup> In writing *The Black Robe*, he maintains, 'Collins demonstrated to his readers the unity of feeling that existed between him and them, and at the same time, by appealing to religious bigotry, suffered a serious loss of dignity as a writer.'<sup>56</sup> Certainly, the Society

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54 David Hilliard, 'UnEnglish and Unmanly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality', *Victorian Studies*, 25 (1982), 181-210 (pp. 186, 185).

55 MacEachen, 'Victorian Crusader', p. 105.

56 MacEachen, 'Victorian Crusader', p. 114.

of Jesus was not popular in the nineteenth century, and the idea that its members wished to infiltrate, and convert, the upper echelons of British life, was a common one.<sup>57</sup> This is not, however, as MacEachen implies and Catherine Peters posits,<sup>58</sup> the thesis of the novel. Collins felt no sense of unity with these religious bigots: rather he wished to illustrate to them that the Jesuits, like any other community, could produce good as well as bad examples. It is to this end that he creates the contrast between Benwell, the stereotypically unscrupulous Jesuit priest, and the self-sacrificingly saintly Penrose. From the start, Collins emphasizes the differences between his two priests: Benwell likes 'plenty of sugar' in his coffee, Penrose takes none; Benwell is 'elderly, fat, and cheerful,' Penrose is young, 'little and lean' in stature, and looks 'like a person who had passed many miserable hours in needlessly despairing of himself and his prospects;' Benwell will do whatever he finds expedient, Penrose is 'irresistibly truthful and sincere' (*BR*, Before the Story, Scene II; Bk. 1, Ch. II). A victim of prejudice—he is disliked by Stella for no better reason than that he is a friend of Father Benwell—and possessing a secret past, which is in some way responsible for his joining the Jesuit priesthood, Penrose is kin to Ezra Jennings, Ovid Vere's mulatto doctor, and all the other unsung heroes who, in Collins's works, highlight the intellectual, moral, or emotional shortcomings of their books' ostensible heroes.

Despite the age-old association of priesthood with homosexuality, it would appear that Penrose's feelings towards Romaine represent nothing more than the 'dog-like affection' Father Benwell identifies (*BR*, Bk. 2, Ch. V). Although the term 'homosexual' was not, in fact, coined until 1869, by the Hungarian Karoly Benkert, and only entered English vocabulary via the translation of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* in the

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57 From mid-century, anti-Jesuit articles had been appearing in many reputable publications: 'Jesuitism As It Is', *British Quarterly Review*, 3 (1851), 523; 'Theory of Jesuit History', *Dublin Review*, 36 (1854), 452-53; 'Curiosities of the Anti-Jesuit Crusade', *Dublin Review*, 41 (1856), 69-70; 'Secret Instructions of the Jesuits', *All the Year Round*, 5 (1861), 853; J. M. Capes, 'The Jesuits in England', *Contemporary Review*, 21 (1873), 43; J. Huber, 'The Jesuits', *Quarterly Review*, 137 (1873), 283; and many more. For summaries of the main arguments contained in such articles, see Dennis, p. 305-10, and MacEachen, 'Victorian Crusader', p. 25-28.

58 Peters, p. 397.

1890s, the connexion of ideas is much older. Nevertheless, as Sedgwick acknowledges—although her purpose is to locate, rather than refute, male homosexuality within nineteenth-century fiction—‘Victorians neither named nor recognized a syndrome of male homosexuality as our society thinks of it.’<sup>59</sup> Modern critics, then, may choose to impute homosexual motives to Collins’s young Jesuit, but it is highly improbable that Collins himself had considered the possibility of such an interpretation. By the same token, Romaine’s emotions, would appear to stem not from any homosexual source, but rather to be the antithetical complement of the misogyny engendered by his unpleasant wife and mother-in-law. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, women were gradually becoming more assertive, and, as Dijkstra remarks, ‘men were often overcome by an antifeminine horror born of the disparity they observed between the idea of the perfect, sexless woman, and the reality of healthy, assertive female bodies.’<sup>60</sup> Faced with a choice between the soothing intellectual conversation of Penrose on the one hand, and the constant inanities of Stella, and incessant sniping of Mrs Eyrecourt on the other, there is little wonder that Romaine prefers the company of his secretary, and laments, when the latter feels obliged to leave him, that the young priest’s departure signifies the loss of his every blessing.

Rivalry is one of the central themes of *The Black Robe*. Indeed, the element of competition can be discerned between almost all of the principal characters in the novel: not only does Stella compete with Penrose for Romaine’s affection, Mrs Eyrecourt also competes with Father Benwell for her son-in-law’s religious interest, and Bernard Winterfield competes with Romaine, albeit passively and with an air of courteous resignation, for Stella’s love. It is this last pairing upon which I wish to concentrate next.

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59 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 174.

60 Dijkstra, p. 202.

Marshall is far from impressed by Collins's characterization of Winterfield, which he finds contrived 'for as a *personality* he is totally devoid of attributes; thus as a *character* he serves entirely as a convenience.'<sup>61</sup> There is, no doubt, some truth in his words, but he fails to appreciate the important role Winterfield plays in Collins's subversive project. Essentially a bland, characterless character, he acquires both the acceptable and the proscribed aspects of masculinity.

Like Eustace Macallan, Bernard Winterfield is, for a large part of the novel, an absentee figure, and what we learn about him initially comes from the opinions of others. Again too, the idea of truth as a subjective rather than an absolute standard dominates the novel. What is presented as an unassailable fact at the start of the novel will inevitably be revised and reassessed by the end of it. Until Father Benwell's clandestine research reveals otherwise, we are convinced that Winterfield is an archetypal melodramatic villain. As a sinister but unnamed figure, he was, we learn, entirely to blame for 'that wretched time which [Stella] ought never to speak of again,' and as 'a gentleman—with light hair and complexion—with a bright benevolent face, and keen intelligent blue eyes—apparently still in the prime of life' (*BR*, Bk. 1, Chs. I, IX), he appears equally menacing: his presence has caused Stella to blanch in horror, and such a picture of masculine amiability must, in Collins's novels, be suspect from the start. He is described by the 'good' characters—that is, by those characters whom we can accept as 'good' because they are, in themselves, peripheral to the events of the story—in terms of the utmost opprobrium. Lady Loring finds him 'hateful,' and his very name conjures up images of 'misfortune,' and 'presentiments of evil,' whilst Mrs Eyrecourt considers him to be a 'monster' (*BR*, Bk. 1, Ch. XI; Bk. 2, Ch. II). Lady Loring's advice to Stella to keep Romaine in ignorance of the shameful event in her past leaves no doubt in the reader's mind about the malicious nature of Winterfield. Detestable though he is, he will keep Stella's secret, maintains Lady Loring, not out of any finer feeling, but

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<sup>61</sup> Marshall, p. 104.

because 'He is no fool. He has his position to keep up—and that is enough to close his lips' (*BR*, Bk. 2, Ch. IV).

Winterfield has, then, in his absence, been introduced to the reader as a manipulative despoiler of young girls—for of what other crime can he be guilty?—and as a man obsessed with maintaining his high social standing. Father Benwell's revelation of him as 'the most fascinating person [he] ever met with [possessing] genial, unassuming manners, a prepossessing personal appearance, a sweet temper, a quaint humour delightfully accompanied by natural refinement' (*BR*, Bk. 2, Ch. IV), and the fact that the poor people in the village regard him as their friend and benefactor, suddenly disrupt the reader's complacency, and make questionable the reliability of the opinions of those characters who have previously calumniated him. Notwithstanding the discord of these opinions, however, Collins does at least seem to have, for once, depicted a male protagonist about whose masculine attributes there can be no doubt: be he arch-villain or philanthropic hero, thus far no signs of feminization or childlike qualities have manifested themselves. But—*caveat lector*.

As the story progresses, and we actually meet Winterfield, as it were in person—and it is typical of Collins in his later novels that he performs this introduction with understatement, and almost anticlimactically—we realize that although Benwell's picture of him is by far the more accurate of the two, Winterfield is a long way from being an exemplar of dominant masculinity. Seven years before the commencement of the story, Winterfield, for reasons best known to himself and Collins, fell in love with, and married, a beautiful but alcoholic circus acrobat, from whom he later separated. Owing to the machinations of this woman, he believed himself to be a widower, and subsequently married Stella. Like Eustace Macallan, it appears that he chose not to mention that he had already been married, a fact that Stella discovers, not from reading the transcript of a trial, but from being greeted, upon emerging from the church, by the

still living first wife, maliciously brandishing her marriage lines in Stella's face.<sup>62</sup> The unfortunate Winterfield, it is true, has been as much a victim of deception as has Stella, but the fact that he has allowed the situation to continue for as long as it has, making only a few feeble attempts to justify his conduct, again reminds us of Macallan's readiness to accept the 'Scotch Verdict' even though he knew himself to be an innocent man. The only wonder is that, unlike Macallan, and indeed, Oscar Dubourg, he is able to reconcile himself to the slur on his character, and does not adopt a pseudonym.

Victorian readers would not have regarded divorce from his first wife as a satisfactory solution to his dilemma, and he would necessarily have to wait for her death to release him from the marriage. His predicament in itself—he is helpless to rectify the situation, and must hope that time will come to his assistance—is a displacement of the female entrapment motif so commonly encountered in Victorian melodrama. His inability, or unwillingness, to prove to Stella that, although events have made him a bigamist in practice, he never intended to lure her into an illegal marriage, again recalls the feminizing attitude of so many of Collins's male characters who, without protest, allow the crimes of others to ruin their lives. By the normal standards of the day—that is, by standards other than Collins's—Winterfield would have been expected, as a gentleman, to prove his honour: by Collins's standards, of course, only a woman would be able to do this on his behalf; and Stella Eyrecourt-Winterfield-Romayne is not made of such stern stuff as Valeria Macallan.

Eventually, and with no effort on his part, the proof of his innocence materializes: his first wife's death-bed confession—which, like the death-bed confession of Sara Macallan, has miraculously reappeared, none the worse for wear, after having been stolen by an admirer—is conveniently delivered into Winterfield's hands by Father Benwell. Rather than make the most of this document to prove his innocence,

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62 Winterfield and Stella part company upon the steps of the church, a device by which Collins preserves Stella's virtue: she is not a Fallen Woman when she marries Romayne, nor—in the eyes of the law—thereafter.

Winterfield remains silent, allowing Stella's hatred of him to continue unabated, because 'he was honourably unwilling to disturb her relations with her husband by satisfying her that he had never been unworthy of the affection which had once united them' (*BR*, Bk. 4, Ch. III). And yet, this honour is not unimpeachable: when asked by Stella to assist in her deception of her new husband, by acting the part of a stranger, he agrees, even though he is aware that his role has been imperfectly thought out, and that he will be compromised if the deception is discovered. Here, as elsewhere, he is prepared to sacrifice his principles, his desires, and by extension his manhood, at Stella's command.

Ironically, it is when Winterfield reveals the truth about his first marriage and wins Stella's forgiveness, that his emasculation becomes complete. Having previously regarded him as an object of fear and loathing, the newly enlightened Stella is enabled to see him for, and treat him as, what he is: her devoted slave. He arranges for her and her mother to go to France, at no small cost to himself—and is dismissed for his pains; he returns after travelling abroad, an activity favoured by many of Collins's male characters, and appears to be winning the favour of his dominatrix, when, again, she decides 'We must meet no more' (*BR*, *After the Story*, Part II), sending Winterfield off, in an uncharacteristically heroic gesture of masculinity, to rescue the kidnapped Penrose from the Apaches.

When Eustace Macallan behaves with similar obedience to his wife's commands, he has the reader's sympathy: Valeria is not the sort of woman to brook insubordination; but Stella Romaine lacks Valeria's resolute character. She is, in fact a ninny, and one cannot help but wonder if, once (legally) married to her, Winterfield will also feel the need to take refuge from her inanities in a religious Retreat. Although contemporary readers no doubt regarded Stella's scruples and ignorant prejudices as epitomizing the height of feminine charm—the foolish and shallow Laura Fairlie, in *The Woman in White*, and the narrow-minded and strait-laced Norah Vanstone, in *No Name*, were both described by

contemporary reviewers as 'lovable,'<sup>63</sup>—to the modern reader Stella is petty and infuriating. From either standpoint, Winterfield's willing subjection to her, undermines his manhood. Like Laura and Norah, she is pretty, well-mannered, unintellectual, and ultimately, a mother: she is, then, as a typical Victorian 'angel,' crying out to be subjugated and ruled by a strong man. According to Proudhon, society had two choices, 'either the subordination of women, guaranteed by the modesty of their position in life, or the degradation of men: We must choose.'<sup>64</sup> Winterfield chooses the latter, and 'it is almost happiness enough to look forward to the day—' (*BR*, After the Story, Part II) when, presumably, he can live in matrimonial bliss with a woman who judged him without listening to his explanation, who lied—in action if not in word—to her legitimate husband about her past relationship, and who can rely on his complete devotion to her every whim and fancy.

#### ❧ IV ❧

The Victorians loved a happy ending, where the hero married the heroine and the villain was suitably castigated for his sins. Collins's quasi-heroes end their novels as married men, and whether frozen in Arctic wastes, incarcerated in lunatic asylums, or suffering from mental and physical exhaustion, Collins's ersatz villains meet similarly fitting ends. Whilst some critics may have found such resolutions unwholesome—Ruskin, for example, alluded scathingly, and not wholly accurately, to *Poor Miss Finch*, 'in which the heroine is blind, the hero epileptic, and the obnoxious brother found dead with his hands dropped off, in the Arctic regions,' as an example of unhealthily extravagant and morbid fiction<sup>65</sup>—they could hardly have objected to the morality of the reward or punishment. Collins's intention, however, goes some way beyond merely

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<sup>63</sup> See J. L. Stewart, 'Wilkie Collins as a Novelist', and H. F. Chorley, unsigned review, in *Athenaeum* (3 January 1863), 10-11; both quoted in Page, pp. 225 and 131, respectively.

<sup>64</sup> Proudhon, *On Pornocracy: Or Women in Modern Times*; quoted in Dijkstra, p. 211.

<sup>65</sup> John Ruskin, 'Fiction, Fair and Foul', originally published in *Nineteenth Century* (June 1880 - October 1881), and reprinted in *The Works of John Ruskin*, XXXIV, (1912), pp. 277-78.



containing the subversive excesses of his creations. By presenting us with good characters who possess as many flaws as their wicked counterparts, and morally bad characters who have a remarkable number of redeeming features, he once again blurs the distinctions between acceptable and proscribed standards of masculine behaviour, morality, and attitude. Moreover, in his attitude to his male characters, he shows himself to be strikingly modern in his expectations. David Gilmore, when researching his book, *Manhood in the Making*, in the late 1980s, was surprised when he did not:

[...] rediscover the old saw that conventional femininity is nurturing and passive and that masculinity is self-serving, egotistical and uncaring. [...] Manhood ideologies always include a criterion of selfless generosity, even to the point of sacrifice. Again and again we find that 'real' men are those who give more than they take; they love others [...] Manhood therefore is also a nurturing concept, if we define that term as giving, subverting, or other-directed. It is true that this male giving is different from, and less demonstrative and more obscure than, the female. It is less direct, less immediate, more involved with externals; the 'other' involved may be society in general, rather than specific persons.<sup>66</sup>

From a Victorian perspective, then, Collins's men, despite their 'self-serving, egotistical and uncaring' tendencies, all show themselves to be in some way lacking the most essential attributes of manliness; from a late twentieth-century standpoint, however, they come much closer to being 'real men'. Oscar, Penrose, and Winterfield show themselves to be possessed of 'selfless generosity, even to the point of sacrifice,' as, in a slightly more ignoble way do Nugent, Dexter, and Romaine. Only Eustace, it would seem, remains guilty of self-interest to the last, and cannot be regarded, either by contemporary or a modern standards, as a 'gentleman in the highest sense of the word' of which he is such a supposedly perfect example.

Masculinity, then, viewed not only through Collins's eyes, but also through the eyes of late twentieth-century researchers and sociologists, is not something natural and unchanging, but man-made and protean: it is, as John Tosh asserts, 'a *relational*

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66 Gilmore, p. 229.

construct, incomprehensible apart from the totality of gender relations; and that it is shaped in relation to men's social power.'<sup>67</sup> The great mystery is why it has taken over a century for us to discover what Collins knew all along.




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<sup>67</sup> *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. by Michael Roper and John Tosh, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 2.

## CONCLUSION



In the course of this study, I have sought to show how, through deploying the devices of popular fiction, and through his singularly complicated and sometimes absurd plots, Collins's later novels have the effect of challenging some of the values and assumptions of the day. When, in 1878, the American author Bret Harte wrote to his wife lamenting the formality of English life, he commented:

Everybody here is carefully trained to their station—and seldom bursts out of it. The *respect* the whole family [with whom he was staying] show toward me is something fine—and *depressing*. I can easily feel how this deference to superiors is ingrained in all.<sup>1</sup>

Collins's characters, however, show a different perspective on that same society: trained to their station they might be, but, in a world where governesses can become ladies, prostitutes can marry clergymen, and wives and schoolgirls can turn detective, bursting out becomes the norm. His attitude towards these, and other minority groups—disgraced women, the disabled, and those of other races—is one of tolerance and understanding. Ideologically, in many ways he is ahead of his time. Sydney Westerfield, Mercy Merrick, Simple Sally, Madame Fontaine, Oscar Dubourg, Francine

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Mulvey, p. 160. The family to which Harte refers is that of the historian and man of letters, James Anthony Froude.

de Sor, Sara Jethro, Miss Dunross, Lewis Romaine, and Miserrimus Dexter, may all be victims of an intolerant society, but never of an intolerant author.

Collins always kept abreast of the issues of the day, and took pains to be accurate, even in the most improbable details. As the modern detective novelist, P. D. James, has observed, 'Collins was one of the first writers in the genre to be meticulous in his research, and he saw it as a matter of pride to get the historical, forensic and medical details right.'<sup>2</sup> Cures for epilepsy really did make men turn blue,<sup>3</sup> and women did, in some cases, resort to consuming arsenic in the hope that it would improve their complexions.<sup>4</sup> Baby farmers, like the unsavoury Mother Sowler, were a reality, whose misdeeds were often reported in the press.<sup>5</sup> Collins's *Simple Sally* is fortunate to survive her experiences at the hands of such a person, as many unwanted children in her situation were deliberately starved to death. It was, of course, more usual that the mother, anxious to avoid the scandal of having an illegitimate child, would surrender her baby to this fate. In Collins's story, where the dividing line between masculine and feminine is blurred, it is John Farnaby, the baby's father, who performs the transaction. Elements of famous legal cases also appear in Collins's novels: the

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<sup>2</sup> P. D. James, 'A Diamond of a Crime Novel', *The Sunday Times (Books)* (30 May 1999), 4

<sup>3</sup> 'The nitrate of silver [as a treatment for epilepsy] has one very serious objection to it [...] it is apt to produce a permanent discoloration of the skin, a frightful lead colour. There is a footman in a house near Cavandish Square who has been thus blackened: and there is a gentleman of property resident at Brighton [whose] face looks as if it had been thoroughly and carefully pencilled over with plumbago.' (Thomas Wilson, M. D., *Lectures on the Principles and Practice of Physic* (London 1857); quoted in Peters, p. 327).

<sup>4</sup> See 'The Poison-Eaters', *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, 16 (1851), 389-91; and 'The Beverages We Infuse', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 74 (1853), 687-89; both discussed in Taylor, Introduction, *The Law and the Lady*, p. xx.

<sup>5</sup> Reputable newspapers frequently carried advertisements placed by unscrupulous baby farmers:

NURSE CHILD WANTED, OR TO ADOPT—The Advertiser, a Widow with a little family of her own, and moderate allowance from her late husband's friends, would be glad to accept the charge of a young child. Age no object. If sickly would receive a parent's care. Terms: fifteen shillings a month; or would adopt entirely if under two months for the small sum of twelve pounds. (A typical advertisement, quoted in James Greenwood, *The Seven Curses of London* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1860), p. 24).

For contemporary accounts of this practice, see 'Baby-Farming', *Pall Mall Gazette* (31 January 1868), 5, and Greenwood, pp. 23-38. For a more modern commentary, see George K. Behlmer, *Child Abuse and moral Reform in England, 1870-1908* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford university press, 1982), pp. 19-40.

Madeleine Smith case provides background for *The Law and The Lady*, as do the cases of Dalrymple vs. Dalrymple and Longworth vs. Yelverton for *Man and Wife*.<sup>6</sup>

Collins's interest lies not merely in his reporting of nineteenth-century social history. His later novels also show him to be a remarkably 'modern' writer in terms of his eye for a topical issue and his readiness to challenge orthodoxies. Because of the moral code of the nineteenth-century, a woman known to have had sexual intercourse with a man who was not her husband made an excellent, if doomed, protagonist for a novel, and many writers of the Victorian era used her to their advantage: Frances Trollope (*Jessie Phillips*), Gustave Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*), Leo Tolstoy (*Anna Karenina*), and others mentioned elsewhere in this study represent a very small proportion of the total.<sup>7</sup> In Victorian eyes, such sexual laxity was but a slight remove from actual prostitution, although many authors felt less than comfortable with the idea of having a street walker as the focus of their novels. Collins, however, has no such qualms, and his fallen women, whether led astray by passion or actively engaged in selling their favours, are granted the same rights of marriage and respectability as their sexually continent sisters.

Moreover, many of the topics of Collins's 'theses' remain of interest. The nature/nurture debate examined in *The Legacy of Cain*, for instance, continues to fascinate authors. Even writers of popular 'blockbusters' have found it a fitting subject for their novels: Ken Follett's *The Third Twin*, for example, deals at length with the effects of up-bringing on a variety of cloned 'siblings', all of whom are unaware that there is anything untoward in the manner of their conception. Vivisection is still a subject of controversy, with modern voices echoing the debate between Lemuel and

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6 See Mary S. Hartman, 'Murder For Respectability: The Case of Madeleine Smith', *Victorian Studies*, 16 (1973), 381-400; Taylor, Introduction, *The Law and the Lady*, pp. xix-xx; and Chapter 1, note 58 above.

7 Curiously, Spanish literature, both in the nineteenth century and now, shows greater leniency towards its peccant women. Leopoldo Alas's Ana in *La Regenta* (1884) is allowed to survive her adulterous affair, and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán has, over the last thirty years written a series of novels in which his hero's practical, possessive girlfriend spends her evenings working as a call girl.

Nathan Benjulia, in *Heart and Science*, about the ethics of such research. Battered and brutalized wives like Hester Dethridge still exist, and many, out of fear and ignorance, still suffer in silence. The prejudices faced by minority groups, whose otherness may be caused by the colour of their skin, their racial origins or social stigmatism, or their physical or psychological differences, remain a continue to be of interest, and it is striking that Collins makes a much stronger case for open-mindedness and acceptance of difference than many modern campaigners.

Collins's attitude towards masculinity has more of a late twentieth-century flavour to it than a nineteenth-century one. Over the last fifteen years, the nature of masculinity has become a subject for debate amongst sociologists as well as literary critics. Surprisingly, the majority of their findings are borne out by Collins's depictions of masculinity within his novels.

If Collins is modern, however, his modernity is in subject, rather than in form, although he does, on one occasion, anticipate stream of consciousness, a narrative technique British literature is not usually considered to have embraced until James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922 and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* in 1925. The scene in *The Law and the Lady* where Dexter's sanity finally deserts him, as he is attempting to tell Valeria a story—about two allegorical characters called Cunegonda and Damoride—anticipates modernist representations of the workings of the mind:

‘This is the story,’ he said, absently. ‘But why Cunegonda? why Damoride? Why not Mistress and Maid? It’s easier to remember Mistress and Maid—’

He hesitated; he shivered as he tried to raise himself in his chair. Then he seemed to rally. ‘What did the Maid say to the Mistress?’ he muttered. ‘What? what? what?’ He hesitated again. Then, something seemed to dawn upon him, unexpectedly. Was it some new thought that had struck him? Or some lost thought that he had recovered? Impossible to say! He went on, suddenly and rapidly went on, in these strange words.

“‘The letter.’ The Maid said, “The letter.” Oh, my heart! Every word a dagger. A dagger in my heart. Oh, you letter. Horrible, horrible, horrible letter.’

What, in God's name, was he talking about? What did those words mean? [...] He went on—like a man sleeping with his eyes open, and talking in his sleep.

'The Maid said to the Mistress. No: the Mistress said to the Maid. The Mistress said, "Show him the letter. Must, must, must do it." The Maid said, "No. Mustn't do it. Shan't show it. Stuff. Nonsense. Let him suffer. We can get him off. Show it? No. Let the worst come to the worst. Show it then." The Mistress said—' He paused, and waved his hand rapidly to and fro before his eyes, as if he was brushing away some visionary confusion or entanglement. 'Which was last?' he said. 'Mistress or Maid? Mistress? No. Maid speaks, of course. Loud. Positive. "You scoundrels. Keep away from that table. The Diary's there. Number Nine, Caldershaws. Ask for Dandie. You shan't have the Diary. A secret in your ear. The Diary will hang him. I won't have him hanged. How dare you touch my chair? My chair is Me. How dare you touch Me?'" [...]

Ariel roused him again. She had no mercy on him; she insisted on hearing the whole story.

'Why do you stop, Master? Get along with it! get along with it! Tell us quick—what did the Missus say to the Maid?'

He laughed feebly, and tried to imitate her.

'What did the Missus say to the Maid? He repeated. His laugh died away. He went on speaking, more and more vacantly, and more and more rapidly. 'The Mistress said to the Maid, "We've got him off. What about the letter? Burn it now. No fire in the grate. No matches in the box. House topsy-turvy. Servants all gone. Tear it up. Shake it up in the basket. Along with the rest. Shake it up. Waste paper. Throw it away. Gone for ever. Oh, Sara, Sara, Sara. Gone for ever."' (LL, Ch. XL)

The term 'stream of consciousness' was coined in 1890, after Collins's death, by William James in *The Principles of Psychology*, in which James argues that the stream of consciousness is what binds our personality together, what enables us to know who we are at all times.<sup>8</sup> When there is some kind of break in this stream, as in the scene above, the sense of identity is disrupted. In *The Black Robe* and *The Legacy of Cain*, as well as in *The Law and the Lady*, Collins explores the areas of such psychological disturbances. The anxiety-induced voices heard by Lewis Romaine and the sense of persecution and paranoia experienced by Helena Gracedieu are typical of the dissociative state that has come to be called Multiple Personality Disorder.<sup>9</sup> Again, Collins's knowledge of such issues, and his attitude towards them, is strikingly forward thinking. According to the psychologist David Cohen:

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8 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1890).

9 See Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'Who's Who? Introducing Multiple Personality', in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. by Joan Copjec, (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 45-63.

While it is true that reports in psychiatric literature of dual personalities date back to 1816, the Victorians were in fact firm believers in the 'unity of the self'. They were yet to slice the mind into compartments such as Ego, Id and Super-Ego, which were later to be located by Freud, Jung and their scrapping disciples.<sup>10</sup>

Collins, however, shows how limited this view is. Whilst he might not name the compartments of the mind, his depictions of slowly crumbling and fragmenting personalities reveal his insight into their existence. Moreover, Cohen, writing in 1996, predicts what Collins had realized in the 1870s, that 'In the future, [...] it will be accepted that high levels of stress often trigger such episodes.'<sup>11</sup>

Not only does Collins show himself to be understanding in cases of mental illness. The treatment of Miserrimus Dexter's physical differences is surprisingly advanced. Unlike most Victorian novelists, Collins, when dealing with a severely disabled man does not resort to making him merely a bogeyman, a monster, an insentient object of repulsion and disgust. The evident and bilateral sexual tension between Dexter and Valeria shows that she is aware of him as a man, and that Collins wishes us to view him in this way too. He is the most memorable male figure in the novel, and, we feel, the one with whom Collins has the greatest sympathy. Dexter, who states openly that he and his chair are one, cannot be dismissed as simply another Quilp, or a 'legless, lustful lunatic in a wheelchair,' as Davis would have us believe; more than any of these, he is the precursor of the modern cyborg, of the Bionic Man and RoboCop, restored and reconstructed to be almost the same as other men, but never quite one of them. As Donna Haraway explains, 'A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. [...] Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted.'<sup>12</sup>

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10 David Cohen, 'Significant Others', *The Guardian Weekend* (15 June 1996), 32.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

12 Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda J. Nicholson, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 190-233 (p. 191).



In the Apology, I mentioned briefly that Collins had been identified as having exerted a certain influence on the writing of Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, as well as on that of his friends Charles Dickens and Charles Reade. Collins's influence did not stop with his contemporaries, although if he has successors, they are, as I have already suggested, to be found in the field of popular fiction. Anne McCaffery's Helva, for example, in *The Ship Who Sang* is Dexter's metaphorical great-great-granddaughter: 'She was born a thing and as such would be condemned if she failed to pass the encephalograph test required of all new-born babies.'<sup>13</sup> Dexter, too, is frequently described by the unsympathetic as a 'thing', an 'it'. Whilst writers in the 1960s had the notion of encephalograph-determined euthanasia, deformed babies remained 'things', an attitude which has changed little since Collins's time. Dexter is still recognizably human, however, and that is his misfortune. The only human part of Helva, a much more extreme form of cybernetic being than Dexter, is her brain; her body—the ship of the title—is wholly man-made, and therefore acceptable and useful to the able-bodied individuals with whom she comes into contact.

There is, of course, no evidence to suggest that McCaffery has been directly or indirectly influenced by Collins. However, there are others who may be said to follow more consciously in his wake. 'He is,' claims Ashley, 'the progenitor of a long line of imitators, the sensationalists of yesterday and the "whodunit" writers of today.'<sup>14</sup> E. R. Gregory regards Collins as the major stimulus behind Dorothy L. Sayers's fiction.<sup>15</sup> *Trent's Last Case*, by E. C. Bentley, whose style has some similarities with Collins's, was first published in America under the title of *The Woman in Black*, a title appropriated seventy years later by Susan Hill.<sup>16</sup> The American academic, William J.

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<sup>13</sup> Anne McCaffery, *The Ship Who Sang* (Mercury Press, Inc., 1961; repr. London: Rapp and Whiting, 1970), p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ashley, 'Wilkie Collins Reconsidered', p. 273.

<sup>15</sup> E. R. Gregory, Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers, *Wilkie Collins: A Critical and Biographical Study* (Toledo, Ohio: Friends of The Universities of Toledo Libraries, 1977), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> E. C. Bentley, *Trent's Last Case* (London: Nelson, [1913]); *The Woman in Black* (New York: Century, 1913); Susan Hill, *The Woman in Black* (London: Hamilton, 1983).

Palmer has seen fit to cast Collins as Dickens's sidekick in a series of detective novels, which purport to be 'a secret Victorian journal, attributed to Wilkie Collins.'<sup>17</sup> Whilst it is always moot to say without certain proof that one author has been influenced by another, Robert Goddard would certainly seem to have assimilated many of Collins's novelistic devices—intricate plots, multiple narrators, concealed identities, stolen letters, scheming females, and even characters called Vimpany are to be found in his works.<sup>18</sup>

Collins's direct legacy may not be particularly substantial or illustrious, but his achievement in his later fiction is still a significant one. These novels provide the reader with a reversed perspective on much of Victorian culture and its values. As we have seen, many of the binary oppositions generally regarded as fixed and immutable are shown to be little more than different sides of the same coin. By his sublation of good and evil, selfish and selfless, masculine and feminine, adult and child, light and dark, hero and villain, we are able to appreciate how, for Collins, such labelling is essentially superficial and meaningless. Despite appearing, at times, to promote stereotypical figures, Collins skilfully turns the tables on his readers and their complacent acceptance of such individuals by blurring and dismantling accepted assumptions, and replacing them with something ultimately more threatening.

It has been my purpose to show that Collins's later novels are worthy of greater critical recognition than they have been granted, and I end my thesis ends with the words of Harry Quilter, Collins's friend and occasional editor:

I shall be content if [this paper] help ever so little in the appreciation of this author [...] for whom I seldom hear a generous word spoken, or read a

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17 William J. Palmer, *The Detective and Mr Dickens: Being an Account of the Macbeth Murders and the Strange Events Surrounding Them*; *The Highwayman and Mr Dickens: An Account of the Strange Events of the Medusa Murders*; and *The Hoydens and Mr Dickens: The Strange Affair of the Feminist Phantom* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990, 1992, and 1997, respectively).

18 Robert Goddard, *Into the Blue*; *Take No Farewell*; *Beyond Recall*; and *Caught in the Light* (London: Bantam, 1990, 1991, 1997, and 1998, respectively).

criticism which recognizes the service he has done, the genius he has shown, and the noble purpose which has always directed his work.

Think for a moment; it is not too late to take off our hats to the great story-teller, and say [...] what thousands of readers must have felt, and said privately: 'We thank you heartily.'<sup>19</sup>



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19 Quilter, Harry, 'A Living Story-teller', *Contemporary Review*, 55 (1888), 572-93; quoted in Page, p. 247.

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